

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: ALTERNATIVE IMAGINARIES, GOTHIC  
TEMPORALITIES: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF  
THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF  
AGING IN THE GOTH SUBCULTURE

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This ethnographic thesis examines the cultural construction of aging in the Goth subculture in Baltimore, Maryland. Formed in Britain in the late 1970s, Goth retains a relatively high number of Elder Goths who participate in the subculture beyond their youth. By combining interdisciplinary analyses of Goth in the American imaginary with the lived experience of Goths over 40 in everyday life and the nightclub, I argue that participation in the Goth subculture presents an alternative to being aged by culture. Elder Goths subvert constructions of age-appropriate normativity by creating individualized “Gothic temporalities” to navigate through the challenges of adulthood and imagine their futures. This thesis underscores the importance of reconceptualizing aging as a lifespan project. Deconstructing age categories moves authority away from structural forces which support ageism and places power in the hands of individual agents.

ALTERNATIVE IMAGINARIES, GOTHIC TEMPORALITIES: AN  
ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF AGING IN THE  
GOTH SUBCULTURE

by

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The idea for this study was born somewhere between a New Year's Eve show with Skydivers in Alexandria, Virginia, and a bookshop I stumbled into on vacation in Salem, Massachusetts. Being a guitarist in Skydivers introduced me to the world of nightclubs and has taken me from playing Goth locales to playing at the French Embassy and back again. For everything involving music, I thank my bandmate Armando Cuéllar. My dear friend Kerry Sandler, who accompanied me on the trip to Salem, encouraged me to buy all of the books in the store on the Goth subculture in sight, and she has been an endless wellspring of support since we met by chance through our shared love of the 1980s synth band Depeche Mode seven years ago. Darlene Smith understands the importance of completing my master's like no other, and I appreciate her friendship and sense of humor every day. Gwyddion Zee opened her Seattle home to me for two weeks while I attended the International Gothic Conference in July 2015, and her relentless optimism over fifteen years of friendship has kept me going when the writing seems endless. During fieldwork, Mike Barbier kept an eye out for my safety, and Linda Pfleiderer provided a home (or rather, storefront) away from home to talk about Goth, the universe, and everything. I am grateful to my parents, Robin and Gary Bush, for tolerating a house spilling over with mysterious books with creepy titles for the past few years; my brother, Jacob Bush, for keeping me entertained with an endless parade of Civil War costumes; my aunt, the Rev. Terri Cofiell, for her advice on surviving graduate school; and my grandparents, Bob and Hattie Cofiell, for always finding my life interesting. To anyone I may have forgotten in these acknowledgments, know that my end of semester absentmindedness makes me no less grateful to you.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

As I knocked on the door of a modest single family home in suburban Alexandria, Virginia on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2010, guitar in hand, I was prepared to play at a private New Year's Eve party with the new wave band that I had recently joined, not witness a funeral. When the door opened, I was immediately greeted by Dom and Crystal, a middle-aged heterosexual couple dressed in black, a pair of Great Pyrenees barking madly, and a Christmas tree decorated with vampires and graveyard-themed accessories. Shortly after our set ended at midnight, Dom dimmed the lights and a group of male partygoers dressed in black emerged from the attached garage, acting as pallbearers for a full size handmade wood coffin which they gently lowered to the floor. Candles placed on a folded up ping pong table flickered against the cinderblock walls, lighting up a framed portrait of Crystal placed on the table, and transforming the room into a church and the table into an altar. A middle-aged woman slowly stood up and began to read a eulogy to Crystal's youth: Crystal had just turned 40. Crystal climbed into the coffin, folded her arms across her chest, and Dom briefly closed the coffin lid while everyone in attendance, including Crystal, burst into friendly laughter and applauded.

Looking around at the black clothing, multi-colored hair, industrial fashion items, small children with Mohawk haircuts, and a few teenagers pretending not to be interested in the band playing in their parents' basement, I realized what I was seeing was contemporary manifestations of the Goth subculture. Rising out of the remnants of the punk subculture, Goth developed at a London nightclub called the Batcave in late 1970s Britain and is defined by a distinctive morbid aesthetic. Lauren M. E.

Goodlad and Michael Bibby write that spectacular style is integral to Goth,<sup>1</sup> and according to Paul Hodkinson, Goth's sartorial style is inspired by early 1980s musical performers Siouxsie Sioux and Bauhaus, and was characterized from the beginning by black back-combed hair and distinctively styled heavy dark make-up accentuating the eyes, cheekbones, and lips.<sup>2</sup> Goth styles have become somewhat more inclusive since the 1990s, incorporating imagery from dance club and fetish scenes,<sup>3</sup> but the subculture remains focused on macabre themes with an overwhelming emphasis on the color black. As I looked around the basement filled with adult Goths drinking, chatting, and chasing after their small children, my head started to spin with questions: Why do adults in their 40s, who are known as Elder Goths, continue to participate in a subculture? What does Goth mean to them as they have grown older? How do they express their identities? Why would Dom surprise his wife with a mock funeral as a birthday celebration?

Subcultures have been associated with age categories from the inception of subcultural studies at the University of Chicago in the 1920s. Linked to youth from the very beginning, the term "subculture" immediately brings to mind rebellious teenage punks and morbid, melancholic Goths thumbing their noses – or perhaps raising their middle fingers - at dominant societal structures. Sociologists have been puzzling over reasons for adolescent anger and disenchantment ever since the

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<sup>1</sup> Lauren M.E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby, Introduction to *Goth: Undead Subculture*, edited by Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Hodkinson, *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture* (London: Berg Publishers, 2002), 38.

<sup>3</sup> Dunja Brill, *Goth Culture: Gender, Sexuality, and Style* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008), 4.

teenager was culturally constructed as a phase of human development separate from adulthood. The underlying assumption of this sociological theorizing is that subcultural participation is something to be grown out of when one moves into adulthood. Laura Vroomen identifies a preconception that “intense popular music investments cannot be carried over into adult life,’ and if that this anomaly does occur, the aging participant is either to be seen living as an ‘extended youth’ or ‘dismissed as a reluctant exile.’”<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, middle-aged subcultural members are left with only two choices, both of which reinforce a youth/adult binary: staying an eternal teenager, or being cast out by dominant society and younger subcultural members for dressing and acting in a manner deemed inappropriate for their age. There is no room for growing into adulthood if one is considered to be outside of normative society. But teenagers become adults, even if they may not “grow up” to become what culture dictates is age appropriate.

This thesis is based on conceptualizing aging as a cultural construct. Rather than being viewed only as a biological inevitability leading to eventual death, aging is part of a social process which Pierre Bourdieu describes as “that slow renunciation or disinvestment (socially assisted and encouraged)” which leads people to “adjust their aspirations to their objective chances, to espouse their condition, become what they are and make do with what they have, even if it entails deceiving themselves....”<sup>5</sup> By differentiating between biological aging and social aging, Bourdieu underscores that the meanings of age and aging are created by external structures. Margaret

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<sup>4</sup> Laura Vroomen, “This Woman’s Work: Kate Bush, Female Fans, and Practices of Distinction” (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2002), 243.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1984), 110-111.

Morganroth Gullette succinctly defines this process as being aged by culture.<sup>6</sup> Our lives are longer and healthier, yet we are constantly bombarded with images of an inverse relationship between aging and societal value. We are manipulated by power structures which are vested in determining what is age appropriate (and thus normal), and what is age inappropriate (and considered deviant). Age appropriateness is culturally constructed, portraying a narrative of decline from a young age, and dividing society by separating ourselves from our past feelings and actions. Severing “adult” from “teenager” implies two different selves, with the younger self holding more cultural value. In this project, I focus on middle age as a cultural construct because of its significance in the narrative of ageism. The societal stigma of turning 40 or 50 marks the decline of our economic value as workers as well as our perceived value as human beings. The older we get, the lower our status becomes, even as our knowledge of the world increases.

At first, as a “spectacular subculture”<sup>7</sup> on the periphery of society, Goth appears to function outside of normative structures. In the introduction to *Goth: Undead Subculture*, Goodlad and Bibby define a subculture as “a social grouping perceived to deviate from the normative ideals of adult communities,”<sup>8</sup> and I use their broad definition of subculture throughout this thesis. Thus, being a Goth, or a member of any subculture, is inherently non-normative<sup>9</sup> and outside of the mainstream. But

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<sup>6</sup> Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979), 80.

<sup>8</sup> Goodlad and Bibby, 6.

<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of this project, “Non-normative” and “age inappropriate” can be considered synonyms.

the concept of age is so totalizing that the narrative of othering occurs within the Goth subculture itself. Sociologist Paul Hodkinson suggests that an Elder Gothic identity is discursively established and endowed with “greater levels of maturity, experience, and authenticity, as distinct from the frantic emphasis on status and attention seeking assigned to younger participants, including their former selves.”<sup>10</sup> Although Hodkinson presents a more positive image of aging, he continues to reinforce the binary by referring to “former selves,” suggesting a stark divide between former and current Gothic styles and behaviors rather than part of an identity that has formed over the lifespan. Even the term Elder Goth is a cultural construct. Although the members of the original British Goth bands are now in their late 50s, Goths are aged by their own subculture far younger. Gothic social media groups consider Goths to be Elder when they are as young as 30 – making the latest crop of Elder Goths infants when the original Goth bands were in their heyday. But how do Elder Goths today view aging? Did they grow up expecting to become Elder Goths, or did they think that they would leave Goth behind as they grew older?

### Research Questions

This ethnographic thesis follows the lives of three adults in their 40s who identify with the Goth subculture, were raised in middle class homes in suburban Baltimore County, and consciously chose not to “grow up” into conventional American middle class lifeways. The contribution of this thesis is to explore relationships between closely held ideologies, the cultural construction of aging, and

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<sup>10</sup> Hodkinson, “Ageing in a Spectacular ‘Youth Culture’: Continuity, Change, and Community Amongst Older Goths,” in the *British Journal of Sociology* 62, no. 2 (June 1, 2011): 274.

the expression of subcultural identities throughout the lifespan. I focus on aging and the Gothic subcultural experience – similar to Joshua Gunn’s description of Goth as “a complex, lived experience of music, style, and scene, inseparably tied to notions of identity through ‘dark’ or ‘darkness,’ iterations of a gothic trope that becomes enthemematically meaningful in relation to the unique needs and experiences of individual Goths.”<sup>11</sup> Gunn’s definition of “enthemematically” underscores the individuality present in the Gothic experience: “[darkness in Gothic music] is deliberately ambiguous because it functions *enthemematically* - in a way that allows each individual [Gothic music] fan to assign meanings to *dark* that reflect his or her individual experience and needs.”<sup>12</sup> Darkness can be considered literal – for example, the darkness of night, or the darkness inside dimly lit Goth nightclubs – and metaphorical. For the Goths interviewed in Gunn’s study in the late 1990s, darkness is a series of adjectives - angsty, angry, representing alienation from the majority’s value system, sadder, eerie, and intense<sup>13</sup> – suggesting that darkness can be internalized as well as in addition to common Gothic signifiers such as cemeteries, bats, skulls, and crosses. Instead of a singular stylistic image which Goths must adhere to or be cast out of the subculture, Goth’s darkness is a collection of related styles and behaviors (for example, regular nightclub attendance and visits to cemeteries) which hold personal meaning. Viewing Goth as an individualized experience, ideology, and system of behaviors allows Goth to be reconceptualized as

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<sup>11</sup> Joshua Gunn, “Dark Admissions: Gothic Subculture and the Ambivalence of Misogyny and Resistance,” *Goth: Undead Subculture*, edited by Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 48.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

part of a lifespan project instead of a subculture tied to youth and indelibly marked as violent and dangerous after the Columbine High School massacre in April 1999.

The questions that I examine in this study work towards reimagining the study of subcultures through the lens of individualized identity projects. Shifting focus away from displays of spectacular style allows a deeper investigation of the Gothic experience. As I spent more time with my informants, I started to consider how Goths conceptualize their own aging processes. Has the meaning of Goth changed over time? How do they make sense of the contradictions that appear in their lives as they have moved into middle age – for example, how can one be an Anglican priest and a member of a subculture which celebrates the macabre? What did they envision their lives would be like when they were in their 40s? Would they be going out to nightclubs or sitting home with their children? Did they even want children, or was going out to clubs more important? Why are they drawn to spending time in certain nightclubs, and have these nightclubs changed along with them?

I bring three fields – American Studies, Ethnographic Methodologies, and Queer Theory - into dialogue with each other when examining these questions. As an American Studies research project, this study is grounded in the cultural construction of identity and difference. Viewing age as an identity category similar to race, ethnicity, and gender allows for the reconceptualization of adulthood as a lifespan project rather than a series of fragments. Identities are not formed in a vacuum; they are constructed within specific discursive frameworks which emerge from multiple modes of power. Following from sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, who view reality as a social construction shaped by a combination of

interactions with others and our life experiences, aging is constructed by societal perceptions of how we should look and behave at certain ages, which ultimately benefits those in power by constructing the middle-aged and elderly as less valuable than youth.

Age categories such as youth and adult are also constructed against each other as forms of difference. Stuart Hall identifies the formation and fragmentation of cultural identities in the late twentieth century as having emerged as the product of difference and exclusion: “identities can function as points of identification because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render ‘outside,’ abjected.”<sup>14</sup> The youth/adult binary exists because of the power to “other.” Similarly, Goth, as a non-normative subculture, can function as an identification because of its opposition to mainstream culture. But value is determined by the dominant group: youth is valued by American culture; the middle-aged and elderly are not. Normativity, wealth, and status symbols are valued by American culture; Goths, punks, and those who choose to identify as “weirdos” or live on the margins of society are othered as undesirable.

As an ethnography, this project pulls together participant-observation and interview research to provide a holistic perspective on subcultural lives and aging inside and outside of the nightclub. I work towards moving subcultural research outside of the sociological arena which focuses on the functional role of nightclubs for subcultural participants. Rather than generalizing about the nature of Goth based on observation at nightclub events, I incorporate the study of everyday life and the words of adult Goths at length. By using extended ethnographic interviews, this

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<sup>14</sup> Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity’?” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, eds, (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 4.



project lets Goths present their life course narratives in their own words – a form of narrative which Gullette terms “age autobiography.”<sup>15</sup> This is a new approach to the study of aging within the Goth subculture, and the first study of aging Goths in the United States. Existing studies have been performed by sociologist Paul Hodkinson and focus on Goths in Britain as a collectively aging community rather than the role of Goth in individual informants’ lives.

This study brings queer theorizing into the conversation by framing participation in the Goth subculture in adulthood as a form of age-inappropriate transgression. Queer theorizing’s commitment to deconstructionism works towards dismantling both age and Goth as totalizing and stable identity categories. Trevor M. Holmes encourages thinking of “goth”<sup>16</sup> as a verb, as in “to goth,” similar to the verb “to queer”; arguing that “gothing,” like “queering,” provides a space for experimentation which resists attempts to name a singular Goth subject.<sup>17</sup> This space allows for the existence of multiple non-normative Gothic identities which adults express in their own individualized manners. There is no one “Goth”; there are many, and Goth is doubly transgressive for middle-aged adults as it subverts constructions of age-appropriate dress and behavior. Essentially, Goths use Gothic identities to queer constructs of aging. Drawing from Jack Halberstam’s concept of queer temporalities, referring to temporalities which allow participants to imagine their

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<sup>15</sup> Gullette, 143.

<sup>16</sup> Holmes chooses to use the lower case “goth” to underscore the marginalization of Goths in contemporary society.

<sup>17</sup> Trevor M. Holmes, “Peri Gothous: On the Art of Gothicizing Gender,” *Goth: Undead Subculture*, edited by Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 80.

futures outside of markers of life experience such as child-rearing,<sup>18</sup> I introduce the term Gothic temporalities to describe how the adult Goths in this study individually negotiate between adult responsibilities, subcultural participation, and middle class lifeways.

### Methodologies

In this project, I combine ethnographic case studies of three adult Baltimoreans who identify as Goth with ongoing observation at two Baltimore nightclubs where subcultural identities are publicly displayed and performed. Baltimore became my research site for three reasons: proximity to the researcher, the city's embrace of eccentricity and association with darkness, and the lessened role of spectacular style for adults over 40. Baltimore's enduring relationship with darkness comes through the legacy of poet Edgar Allan Poe, who wrote some of his early poems in a tiny West Baltimore rowhome and died in the city in 1849 at the age of 40. Poe-related historic sites and his grave are marketed by the city as tourist attractions, and The Orpheus, Baltimore's oldest Goth club, describes itself as a part of the "The Darkest City in America." Historically themed alcoholic drinks ("Edgar Allan Poe Drink Specials: Come out and try this month's 1800s drinks! The Bronx Blood, Billy Taylor, and Klondike Ice are delicious drinks from the turn of the last century!") are served at the club's "Charm City Masquerade."<sup>19</sup> Even professional

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<sup>18</sup> Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>19</sup> "Charm City by Night! [4/13] A Vampire Masquerade," Facebook event, April 13, 2013, accessed April 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/events/14505078233288/>. "Charm City" is a Baltimore promotional slogan referring to the city's physical composition of "charming," historic neighborhoods.

sports fandom (perhaps the least seemingly Gothic of pastimes) is filtered through darkness in a city that Orpheus refers to as “The Darkest City in America.”

Baltimore’s professional football club, the Baltimore Ravens, is the only NFL team named after a poem, and one of the team slogans, “NEVERMORE,” is directly taken from Poe’s poem “The Raven.” The city is plastered year round with images of menacing black ravens in support of the team, and the official mascots are a pair of African Ravens who travel to M&T Bank Stadium from the local zoo for each home game.

My primary research method in this project is the ethnographic interview. Over the course of two years, I have had numerous conversations and performed extended unstructured interviews with multiple adults who are affiliated with the Goth subculture. I began attending Goth dance nights in Baltimore in 2013, performed two preliminary interviews as part of my methods coursework in the Fall 2014 semester, and recorded unstructured interviews with my informants from December 2015 to January 2016. Although the focus of this thesis is lived experience, an examination of Goth’s presence in contemporary American media and culture is necessary to situate adult Goths within a societal context. I briefly perform a textual analysis of the television sketch comedy *Portlandia*, starring comedian Fred Armisen and musician Carrie Brownstein as a variety of middle-aged couples, one of whom are Elder Goths Vince and Jacquelin.

When studying aging music scenes, sociologist Nicola Smith advocates for the application of narrative analysis and the use of gatekeeper individuals in order to

gain access to the subculture.<sup>20</sup> The three main informants for this project have had substantive involvement in the Baltimore Goth scene since the 1980s as subcultural producers: gateway informant and self-described “Goth at heart” Linda, 48, a married former college radio DJ who has attended Goth-themed events for over twenty-five years, and is the sole proprietor of “In the Details,” a clothing boutique in the neighborhood of Hampden which has sponsored Goth-themed nightclub shows. Longtime friends Michael, 40, and Vanessa “DJ Neska”, 43, met in the cafeteria of a suburban shopping mall and have been involved in the scene as musicians and DJs since they were high schoolers in the late 1980s. Michael is a veteran of numerous local punk and Goth bands and currently starting a new synthesizer based musical project, and Neska spins at multiple Goth and Industrial themed dance nights in the Mid-Atlantic region. Outside of the nightclub, Michael is a Rector at St. Stephen’s Anglican Church in the suburb of Timonium, an owner of two small software development companies, and a married father of four. Neska is a single urban dweller currently employed by the Baltimore City Women, Infants, and Children program. They reflect the demographic of the subculture in Baltimore: primarily white and heterosexual. Goths of color are a small part of the scene in Baltimore. In some cities and in online communities, Goths of color create their own sub-subcultures such as “Afro-Goths,” with subcultural style incorporating elements of African dress.<sup>21</sup>

Around ten to fifteen percent of Goths who attend dance nights and Goth-themed live

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<sup>20</sup> Nicola Smith, “Beyond the Master Narrative of Youth: Research Aging Popular Music Scenes,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, ed. Derek B. Scott (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013), 438.

<sup>21</sup> Melissa Lytton, “Goths Around the World,” *Gothic Beauty Magazine*, Issue 46, 47. In the issue’s cover story about African-American Goths, Lytton finds little consensus of the meaning of “Afro-Goth,” but all of the Goths in her article agreed that the sub-genre of Goth is less important than “exploring the darker side of yourself and life.”

music events are African-American.<sup>22</sup> As background research for coursework in Ethnography and Performance prior to this project, I interviewed singer/songwriter Roy of the husband and wife synthpop band Red This Ever, 43, and Cuban-American singer/songwriter/guitarist Armando (“Spacey”), of the new wave band Skydivers, 48, who was involved in the Goth scene in his hometown of Miami in the late 1980s and early 1990s before relocating to Maryland.

My interview questions were informed by the general guidelines in James Spradley’s piece “The Ethnographic Interview” combined with Gullette’s perspective on aging in *Aged by Culture*. Rather than asking my informants about the “then” versus “now” aspects of participation in the subculture, and creating a perhaps unintentional “othering” of their youth as a separate identity, my goal in formulating questions was to gain an understanding of the informants’ relationships with the Goth subculture throughout their life path and how they view the narrative of aging. What did they think that their lives would be like in their 40s? What clothes did they think they would be wearing, and what bands would they be listening to? What do they envision happening in their lives in the next ten years? What do they envision will happen to Goth?

Since this project differs from previous research on Goth by placing a focus on the everyday, I also spent time with all of my informants in at least one of their workplaces. My informants all work multiple jobs, and obviously not all employers

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<sup>22</sup> African-American guitarist Tony (“Gazz Mazk”) of the band M. O. L. D. (Machines of Living Death), who regularly attends Goth and metal themed shows in the Baltimore area, expressed doubt in a conversation at the Depot that the Goth subculture still exists in Baltimore. In an interview at his home, Spacey, the Cuban-American guitarist and songwriter of the band Skydivers, informed me that whatever scene is left in Baltimore lacks cohesion. Their perspectives underscore the need for future research on adults of color within the Goth scene.

are amenable to a graduate student observing their business functions. I assisted in basic business operations at Linda's clothing boutique "In the Details," observed Michael preaching at St. Stephen's in November 2015; and observed Neska DJing at multiple nightclubs throughout a two year period.

The nature of this project encompasses a minor amount of self-ethnography. I do not identify as a member of any subculture or claim any insider knowledge of Goth. John Caughey writes that the ethnography of the everyday involves an implicit comparison with the ethnographer's own life and social circles: "it is largely by contrast that one discovers the patterns of a social scene,"<sup>23</sup> and I briefly compare my experiences growing up in the same suburb as the Goths in this study to compare differences between age cohorts.

In order to situate Goth within a local context, I observed two monthly dance nights held in Baltimore over a period of two years: "Elektroschock," a dance night held at the upscale gay and lesbian nightclub Grand Central, and "Batz Over Baltimore," a "Goth-Post Punk-Death Rock and Ol'Skool Industrial" night held at the Depot, a small dive bar located a few blocks north of Grand Central, which has become the heart of the Gothic community for adults. I also attended multiple shows by Baltimore-based Goth and industrial themed bands White Shadow, Stars and the Sea, and The Drowning Season, at the Depot. I analyzed the clubs' promotional materials, event social media pages, and websites to ascertain how these shows and dance nights are marketed to appeal to different clubgoing demographics.

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<sup>23</sup> John Caughey, "The Ethnography of Everyday Life: Theories and Methods for American Culture Studies," *American Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1982): 238.

### Thesis Structure

This research project explores relationships between subcultural membership and aging through a discussion of Goth as a form of deviant adulthood as presented in American popular culture and in the lived experience of individual Goths. The review of academic literature which frames this project is presented in the second chapter. After providing a brief overview of subcultural theories, I review literature on the Goth subculture to position this study relative to existing sociological scholarship. I move onto examining Gullette's *Aged by Culture*, one of the primary framing devices for this project, and discuss emerging literature on subcultures and aging. I provide an overview of the ethnographic turn within American studies which shaped my methodologies and conclude by presenting queer theorizing as a lens for the deconstruction of age categories.

In the third chapter, I explore how the Goth subculture is framed within the American imaginary. Goths have been frozen in time as rebellious youth and misinterpreted as a dangerous cult since the Columbine massacre. When compared with rock musicians, who are allowed to age, the few Goths who are portrayed as adults are targets of mockery for their non-normative appearance and macabre life choices. Through an analysis of middle-aged couples on the IFC television sketch comedy *Portlandia*, I show how two Gothic characters, Jacquelin and Vince, create an alternative imaginary: a Gothic temporality, as an alternative to the dominant narrative of being aged by culture.

The ethnographic elements of the thesis presented in the fourth and fifth chapters examine adult Gothic identities and outside of the nightclub. The fourth

chapter extends cultural images of Goth to lived experience through an ethnographic study of Elder Goths. By focusing on life history, employment, and expression of identities outside of the nightclub environment, I show how middle-aged adults create individualized Gothic temporalities similar to what Jacquelin and Vince created in *Portlandia*, to navigate through the contradictions of their everyday lives.

The fifth chapter explores how adult Gothic identities are displayed within the nightclub through an analysis of two monthly Baltimore nightclub events as cultural landscapes. In this chapter, I develop a framework for understanding Gothic Spaces based on understanding Goth as a mode of communication which can shape identities and transform private buildings into Gothic Spaces which build and strengthen communal bonds.<sup>24</sup> Using the concept of queer phenomenology, I show that the physical layouts of these clubs are oriented in ways to create non-normative landscapes which welcome the display of adult Gothic identities. As a space for aging, the Depot in particular has stayed in sync with the priorities of Elder Goths which have shifted towards comfort, convenience, and conversation as attendees have aged.

I conclude this thesis by arguing that Goth in adulthood presents an alternative to being aged by culture which is created on an individual level and expressed throughout the life course. Elder Goths subvert the cultural narrative of decline by embracing individualized conceptions of darkness. Biological decline is an inevitable part of life, and aging is embraced by Goths, not feared. This project does not intend to be a comprehensive study of the state of Goth in America, a comparison of

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<sup>24</sup> See Leah Bush, "Creating Gothic Spaces: Scene, Style, and Community in the Goth Subculture," (presentation, Chesapeake American Studies Association annual conference, Baltimore, MD, March 28, 2015).



subcultural clothing styles in the 1980s and the present, an exercise in geriatrics, or a detailed analysis of the Gothic image. Instead, it presents a portrait of a group of middle-aged adults who choose to define themselves as non-normative while still outwardly expressing some traits of middle class normativity. Growing up Goth is the way through which they understand their lives and are shaping their futures.

Viewed from a broader perspective, the purpose of this study is to explore how cultural ideologies held in youth become part of adult identities over the life course. Style-based subcultures are far more than groups of youth sharing spectacular styles and hanging out at nightclubs; they are communities of individuals who create alternatives to normative ways of living. Understanding how subcultural members conceptualize their own aging processes works towards dismantling age as a totalizing identity category and tearing down the ever looming specter of ageism which hovers over society. The Elder Goths in this study do not “deceive themselves,”<sup>25</sup> as Bourdieu writes of the process of social aging; they are active agents in creating their own alternative temporalities as a form of resistance against the dominant societal narrative of decline. By presenting Elder Goths’ perspectives on aging in their own words, my goal is to let them tell the story of how this can be accomplished. As Gullette writes, “transforming ordinary life storytelling will be the best way to comprehend our troubled world and a sign that we are changing it profoundly.”<sup>26</sup> Deconstructing age categories rips authority away from structural forces and places power in the hands of individual agents. Instead of becoming

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<sup>25</sup> Bourdieu, 111.

<sup>26</sup> Gullette, 158.

societal outcasts, adult Goths' embrace of non-normativity in middle age encourages us to be true to ourselves as we move throughout the life span.

## Chapter 2: Literature

Beginning with a brief overview of perspectives on subcultural theory and scholarly perspectives on the Goth subculture, this literature review lays out the three bodies of knowledge which frame this project: Aging and Subcultural Studies, Ethnographic Methodologies, and Queer Theory, before discussing questions that develop out of the literature.

### *Subcultural Studies and the Goth Subculture: An Overview*

The majority of research on subcultures, in both America and Britain, has been through sociological lenses. In the early twentieth century, the work of various scholars at the University of Chicago conceptualized subcultures as groupings of deviant youth in a situational context. The term “subculture” has undergone various revisions evolutions since its origination in the first half of the twentieth century at the University of Chicago, and there remains significant sociological debate over the term. Two opposing viewpoints can be found in Hodkinson’s *Goth: Identity, Style, and Subculture*, an argument for the retention of the term “subculture” on the grounds of Goth subcultural solidarity, and David Hesmonhaldagh’s 2005 article “Subcultures, Scenes, or Tribes? None of the Above” in *The Journal of Youth Studies*, a sociological critique of Andy Bennett’s concept of “neo-tribes,” and Hodkinson’s “subcultural substance,” which concludes that that the entire concept of youth culture should be considered obsolete and irrelevant.

The early theories of the Chicago School conceptualized groups of youth sharing similar styles as having innate ties to gangs and social deviance. This research

provided the framework for the theories of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), and the 1976 anthology *Resistance through Rituals*, which interpreted post-war British working class youth cultures as symbolic of resistance to the dominant hegemony of society. The theories of the CCCS were the first to examine the role of the subcultural audience in ascribing meaning to popular music, style, and popular culture, and the first CCCS study of subcultures to incorporate ethnographic elements remains the most influential: *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, by Dick Hebdige, which traces the development of the British punk movement as a case study of spectacular subcultures. Subcultural style can be understood as a coded response to societal changes which affect entire communities.<sup>27</sup> Hebdige legitimized the academic study of music and style based subcultures, and touches upon what have become the major themes in subcultural studies: the formation of group identity through difference, the importance and creation of subcultural style through “bricolage” (the appropriation of mainstream styles to serve a subversive purpose), and the trajectory of subcultures as they inevitably become co-opted by the mainstream. Individual identity is not a concern for Hebdige – *Subculture* contains his personal conclusions on the meaning of style-based subcultures based on participant-observation research and a semiotic approach to the study of subcultures.

Beginning in the 1990s, subcultural theories broke down traditional notions of subculture as a definitive grouping based on shared styles and tastes. Sociologist Andy Bennett’s article “Subcultures or Neo-Tribes?” proposes an entirely new framework – the fluid concept of the “neo-tribe” – as a replacement for the term

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<sup>27</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979), 80.

“subculture” in understanding the relationship between youth cultures, music, and style. By applying Michel Maffesoli’s definition of the “neo-tribe” as a temporal grouping based on pluralistic social identities and lifestyles to urban British dance cultures, Bennett forms a new cultural model which he argues is more applicable to post-modern societies than class-based CCCS theories which draw clear boundaries of musical taste and style. However, Bennett does not ask participants who favor this new genre-less music to describe how they define themselves. Do they view themselves as part of a single subculture, many subcultures, or none at all?

#### Scholarly Perspectives on Goth

According to CCCS-trained sociologist Paul Hodkinson in *Goth: Identity, Style, and Subculture*, the first study of the Goth subculture to incorporate ethnographic methods, Goth contrasts sharply with post-modern theories of fragmented subcultures because of the features of Goth which distinguish the subculture from more temporal groupings of youth. Based on a study of British Goth in the late 1990s, Hodkinson’s sociological analysis of the Goth subculture centers around his reworking of subcultural theories to emphasize Goth as an independent grouping that does not require opposition to a capitalistic dominant culture. In contrast to David Muggleton’s “post-modern”<sup>28</sup> and Bennett’s “neo-tribal”<sup>29</sup> theories emphasizing subcultural fluidity and fragmentation, Hodkinson argues that the features of Goth imply a level of cultural substance which distinguish Goth from

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<sup>28</sup> David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Post-Modern Meaning of Style* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> Bennett, “Subcultures or Neo-Tribes?”, 106.

more temporal groupings of youth.<sup>30</sup> These four indicators of subcultural substance are distinctiveness in ideals and tastes, subcultural identity, subcultural commitment, and a relatively high level of autonomy of media and commerce.<sup>31</sup>

Hodkinson's analysis of Goth style, identity, and subcultural consumption practices are formed around this basis of Goth as a community. Topics investigated are Goth subcultural style, subcultural belonging, friendship and subcultural commitment, and subcultural consumption practices. Although Hodkinson's discussion of the subculture seems comprehensive at first glance, *Goth* is not without serious shortcomings. The major limitation of his sociological analysis is that he examines Goth only on the macro level and does not attempt to elucidate the meaning of Goth for individual participants. Hodkinson is not particularly interested in the lives and opinions of Goths themselves, and finds no shared structural, psychological, or political meaning to Goth style, a curious assertion for a subculture with extreme longevity and a consistent emphasis on the macabre.

Most academic research on the subculture has been performed in Britain, and the majority of scholarly researchers are participants in the subculture writing from positions of insider knowledge. Because so many scholars are subcultural members, little tension is apparent within Goth subcultural scholarship other than discussion of the controversial role of the vampire in relation to subcultural style. Goth is described by these insider scholars as an educated, middle class subculture marked by

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<sup>30</sup> Hodkinson, *Goth*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 29-33.

exceptional peacefulness and a high degree of tolerance of different lifestyles.<sup>32</sup> Brill describes Goths as unusually educated and literate with an intellectual stance allowing for critical reflection on philosophical questions.<sup>33</sup> Sara Martin observes that Goth is primarily internalized, and is about “living one’s own life within a self-made fantasy Gothic world whose main referents are shared with others but where asocial rather than anti-social behavior is the rule.”<sup>34</sup> David Shumway and Heather Arnet argue that the morbid Goth aesthetic is representative of a desire to escape everyday life which is misunderstood by outsiders as a coveting of death.<sup>35</sup>

But despite primary research indicating Goth’s peacefulness, many studies on the American Goth subculture by outsiders continue to paint Goth as a dangerous and violent youth phenomenon erroneously linked to the April 1999 Columbine High School mass shootings in Littleton, Colorado. Catherine Spooner writes that Columbine dragged Goth from the private into the public sphere, shifting the realm of Goth from feminized private spaces associated with dressing up and dancing, to public spheres associated with masculinized violence.<sup>36</sup> Goths became scapegoats after the Columbine murders, with high school students being sent home from school for wearing “strange” attire and authorities encouraging teenagers to call hotlines to

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid..

<sup>34</sup> Sara Martin, “Gothic Scholars Don’t Wear Black: Gothic Studies and Gothic Subcultures,” *Gothic Studies* 4, no. 1 (2002): 40.

<sup>35</sup> David Shumway and Heather Arnet, “Playing Dress Up: David Bowie and the Roots of Goth,” *Goth: Undead Subculture*, edited by Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 139.

<sup>36</sup> Catherine Spooner, “Goth Culture,” in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, edited by David Putner (Malden, M.A.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 355.

identify “odd” or “weird” people.<sup>37</sup> Carolyn Rutledge, Professor of Education and Health Services at Old Dominion University, links the young gunmen, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, to Goth, arguing that Goth culture attracts teenagers who have a distrust of society and have suffered past abuse and surround themselves with people, music, and activities that foster angry or depressed feelings.<sup>38</sup> Goth was perceived as enough of a societal menace post-Columbine that the town of Blue Springs, Missouri, received a \$273,000 federal “Goth Grant” to investigate and combat Goth culture.<sup>39</sup>

Yet minimal scholarship has been done to combat the erroneous perspective on Goth as a violent youth cult. In the 2002 issue of the literary journal *Gothic Studies*, Martin argues that the absence of Gothic Studies<sup>40</sup> scholarship on the Goth subculture has allowed for media misrepresentations of the subculture as violent and “highlighted our glaring ignorance of the dynamics of exchange between the literary subcultures of the past and the popular subculture of the present.”<sup>41</sup> The only ethnographic studies of the Goth subculture in America were performed in the late

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<sup>37</sup> Goodlad and Bibby, 13.

<sup>38</sup> Carolyn M. Rutledge, Don Rimer, and Micah Scott. “Vulnerable Goth Teens: The Role of Schools in This Psychosocial High-Risk Culture.” *Journal of School Health* 78, no. 9 (2008): 459–464, accessed May 2015. doi:10.1111/j.1746-1561.2008.00331.x.: 459.

<sup>39</sup> *American Goth*, directed by Ryan Rhea (2005).

<sup>40</sup> The field of Gothic Studies, which originated in the early 1990s as a niche sub-field of 18<sup>th</sup> century British literary criticism, has recently expanded to include textual analyses of film, media, television, and popular culture, but lacks discussion of the Goth subculture. Gothic Studies tends to refer to what Gunn and the Goths in this study describe as “dark” and “morbid” as “uncanny” and “unsettling” phenomena. I can personally attest to this, having attended the International Gothic Association Conference “Gothic Migrations,” held in July 2015 in Vancouver, Canada. Few panels mentioned the subculture at all, and only two discussed relationships between Goth/the Gothic and music. The panelists presenting on Gothic music were the only people in attendance at the conference who dressed in Gothic subcultural clothing. Everyone else was dressed business casual – but still wearing a lot of black.

<sup>41</sup> Martin, 41.



1990s and published in the 2006 anthology *Goth: Undead Subculture*, and the studies focus on expressions of identity during adolescence and young adulthood. Joshua Gunn's study "Dark Admissions: Gothic Subculture and the Ambivalence of Misogyny and Resistance," constructed through cultural critique and interviews with self-identified young adult Goths, informs this project by viewing Goth as an experience rather than a cultural image for semiotic deconstruction. For Gunn, Goth is ambivalent, an individualized subcultural ideology created through "darkness," a term which holds multiple meanings depending on the individual Goth being consulted. But how do Goths continue to understand this darkness once they move into middle age and take on adult responsibilities? What do their adulthoods look like?

### *The Cultural Construction of Age*

As a part of social aging process, adulthood is culturally constructed. In *Aged by Culture*, Margaret Morganroth Gullette identifies an "age identity" or "age narrative" as a social and mental construct which suggests that there is only one life course – a binary narrative of progress in childhood, which quickly becomes a narrative of decline as one has moved past youth. Even as people are living longer, healthier lives than our ancestors, culture pushes the decline narrative as beginning earlier in the life course. Age is constructed as a totalizing narrative "and a primary example of life-chance differences... age war obscures the cult of youth, class war from above, and globalization... and cohort-naming breaks the sense of life-course

continuity, which underlies any hope of generational unity.”<sup>42</sup> Age categories such as “Boomer” and “Generation X” are labeled and constructed as enemies for the benefit of those in positions of power. As age anxiety about growing older increases, we become aged by culture faster than the generations before us. Losing in perceived age-related competitions instills a “masochistic belief in human obsolescence.”<sup>43</sup> Gullette’s argument is clearly borne out in contemporary American culture, where age anxiety has reached such an extreme that in a *New York Times* investigative piece published in August 2015, highly paid white-collar workers at Amazon revealed their fears of being replaced by younger employees, culminating in Max Shipley, a young father of two, concerned that Amazon will replace him with a college student who has fewer commitments.<sup>44</sup> Shipley is twenty-five years old. The acculturation of age as decline is so strong that he considers himself disposable when he is barely old enough to rent a car.

Gullette’s overarching theme is “the politics of the representations of age- from a location in any of the life-course imaginaries of our time,”<sup>45</sup> and her conceptualization of aging frames this project in two ways. By presenting aging as a lifespan project rather than a narrative of decline, *Aged by Culture* presents an examination of emotions, feelings, and lives of middle-aged adults in ways that are

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<sup>42</sup> Gullette, 58.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>44</sup> Jodi Kantor and David Streitfeld, “Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace,” *The New York Times*, August 15, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/technology/inside-amazon-wrestling-big-ideas-in-a-bruising-workplace.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Gullette, 45.

not inextricably tied to either nostalgia for one's youth or geriatrics and eventual death. Viewing subcultural membership as part of a life path works to dismantle assumptions that adult membership in a subculture is a way to hold onto one's youth - or in the case of the Goth subculture's emphasis on morbid themes, a means to anticipate an end.

*Aged by Culture's* conceptualization of the lifespan also informs this project by refusing to break the life course into a series of segmented fragments. Gullette describes the culturally constructed fragmentation of the life course as a "giant-sized enemy"<sup>46</sup> which leads adults to "other" their past selves instead of viewing their life as a path or a narrative. One of the goals of this project is to understand how subcultural members conceptualize their own aging narratives, rather than "othering" my informants by collecting and comparing data on their past and current clothing styles and behavior. People are aged by culture – or subculture.

#### Perspectives on Subcultures and Aging

Four major perspectives emerge from literature on subcultures and aging. First, that subcultural participation is a pleasure seeking activity which functions as a way to retain subcultural capital throughout adulthood. In a study of the aging Northern Soul dance culture in Britain, sociologist Nicola Smith argues that participation for adult subcultural members as being the same as it was in youth - "to possess an identity and a form of cultural involvement that results in the achievement

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 192.

of scene-specific status, personhood, and subsequent selfhood.”<sup>47</sup> The communal aspect of subcultural membership so emphasized by Hodkinson is completely ignored without providing supporting data that Northern Soul is a fragmented, “neo-tribal” group rather than a subculture. Although Smith is heavily critical of Hodkinson’s theory of subcultural substance for not accounting for fluidity within subcultural participation,<sup>48</sup> Smith’s argument regarding the appeal of youth cultures to adults suffers from a similar sociological malady by failing to address the lives and opinions of subcultural members in her analysis. Her lack of focus on music scenes as communities is unsurprising given her perspective of music scenes as “pleasure-oriented participation”<sup>49</sup> rather than a deeper indication of substance or meaning.

A more nuanced perspective introduced by Andy Bennett argues that subcultural membership has become an internalized ideology. In “Punk’s Not Dead: The Continuing Significance of Punk Rock for an Older Generation of Fans,” Bennett describes how punks have toned down their visual image, and articulated their attachment to a scene primarily composed of teenage and 20-something punks through experience, status in the subculture, and the transmission of punk knowledge to younger punks.<sup>50</sup> Based on interviews with fifteen male working-class punk music fans over 30, Bennett argues that older fans have created a new set of punk aesthetic

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<sup>47</sup> Nicola Smith, “Beyond the Master Narrative of Youth: Research Aging Popular Music Scenes,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, ed. Derek B. Scott (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013), 436.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 431.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 435.

<sup>50</sup> Andy Bennett, “Punk’s Not Dead: The Continuing Significance of Punk Rock for an Older Generation of Fans,” *Sociology* 40(2): 233.

practices and negotiate being older in ways where their age is turned into an advantage.

The anthology *Ageing and Youth Cultures: Music, Style, and Identity*, edited by Bennett and Hodkinson, and based on “Punk’s Not Dead,” provides a range of perspectives on aging within various youth cultures and details strategies which members use to retain their subcultural affiliations. Noteworthy for this study are Ross Haenfler’s study of “straight-edgers” over 30 in “More than the X’s On My Hands: Older Straight Edgers and the Meaning of Style,” which argues that spectacular style was meaningful to “straight-edgers” but not essential, who redefined “straight edge” as an internal philosophy.<sup>51</sup> Drawing upon eight years of ethnographic research in Colorado, Haenfler argues that adult straight-edge identities are articulated individually and the meanings of straight-edge symbols renegotiated to represent straight-edge to suit the demands of different adult contexts. For Haenfler, “authenticity” is a large part of an ongoing identity project. Subcultural authenticity for older “straight edgers” hinged on action and behavior consistent with the straight edge community (such as abstinence from alcohol and veganism) rather than an overt display of subcultural style. His study underscores the importance of ethnographic research when examining adult subcultural identities; spectacular style is only one component out of many in the determination of subcultural membership and status.

Joanna Davis argues in “Punk, Ageing, and the Expectations of Adult Life” that older punks identify the meaning of punk as how it functions in their lives

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<sup>51</sup> Ross Haenfler, “More than the X’s On My Hands: Older Straight Edgers and the Meaning of Style” in *Ageing and Youth Cultures: Music, Style, and Identity* (London: Berg Publishers, 2012), 22-23.

through the development of a consistent sense of self: “If punk and self are indivisible, it becomes quite clear that punk will be *how* one lives one’s life.”<sup>52</sup> Aspects of adulthood which could be thought to detract from subcultural membership – such as parenthood - provide opportunities to redefine adulthood, confirming that punk has become more of an individually articulated phenomenon.

Hodkinson provides a different perspective on aging subcultures, placing importance on the outward displays of subcultural style for adults as a form of enduring consistent distinctiveness. From his perspective, Goth is an aging community where demonstrations of spectacular style remain a core value, and Elder Goth is a distinct identity within the subculture. Hodkinson’s recent publications, “The Collective Ageing of a Goth Festival,” in *Ageing and Youth Cultures*, and “Ageing in a Spectacular ‘Youth Culture’: Continuity, Change, and Community Amongst Older Goths,” in the *British Journal of Sociology*, speak to the issues surrounding a Goth subculture dealing with adult responsibilities and the stylistic shifts to adapt Gothic styles to changing bodies. Hodkinson’s main arguments in the two articles are very similar; both emphasize that Goth remains a collective style community retaining a commitment to the subculture. Group belonging, collective style, and publicly articulated displays of subcultural identity remain of paramount importance to older Goths.<sup>53</sup> By interviewing the same subcultural participants as he did in *Goth* in the late 1990s, Hodkinson creates a perhaps unintentional longitudinal analysis of the subculture.

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<sup>52</sup> Joanna Davis, “Punk, Ageing, and the Expectations of Adult Life” in *Ageing and Youth Cultures: Music, Style, and Identity* (London: Berg Publishers, 2012), 116.

<sup>53</sup> Hodkinson, “Ageing in a Spectacular ‘Youth Culture’: Continuity, Change and Community amongst Older Goths,” 277.

For the British Elder Goths interviewed by Hodkinson, group belonging, collective style, and publicly articulated displays of subcultural identity remain important, but large amounts of tension remained between adult responsibilities such as childrearing and the commitment to the Goth scene through attendance at nightclubs. Hodkinson observes that the consciousness of the aging process has caused Gothic styles to be adapted in a manner deemed suitable by Goths for their aging bodies, with more of a focus placed on comfort and concealment. This shows that even within the Goth scene, Goths hold negative images of other Goths who are dressed in styles which are perceived to be age-inappropriate. Hodkinson quotes 29 year old Jane: "...you can ...look at somebody on the dance floor and think 'oh my God, do I look like that when I wear similar things?' You know, they're there gyrating and things and they look sort of wobbly or something and they've squeezed into this PVC and everything's going over the sides..."<sup>54</sup> Because of the dominant narrative of decline, age becomes a barometer of judgment and appearance a matter of fat shaming and ageism, rather than a marker of inclusion even before the age of thirty.<sup>55</sup> In terms of clothing styles, Goths are aged by subculture.

An emergent perspective on subcultures presented by Andy Bennett and Laura Vroomen views aging as part of a life path rather than a decline narrative which focuses on body concealment. Although neither Bennett nor Vroomen examine Goth,

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>55</sup> The most recent subcultural trend, "Health Goth," marked to Goths in their 30s and above, mixes athletic wear with Goth-themed accessories as part of a lifestyle aesthetic promoting healthy living and physical fitness through sportswear that inverts typical "positive thinking" athletic slogans and logos. With slogans like "Dead Worldwide" and upside-down sportswear logos, "Health Goth" mixes public stylistic transgression in the gym environment with a desire for self-transformation and personal empowerment. But is "Health Goth" about healthy living or an attempt to combat the physical realities of growing older?

both scholars view aging as a cultural construct. Bennett's recent book *Music, Style, and Aging: Growing Old Disgracefully?* argues that music becomes an integral part of an individual's personal history by acting as a critical force within his or her life path, and becomes an important source of life-mapping for aging music fans.<sup>56</sup> Similar to Gullette, Bennett views aging as a cultural construct, not a death sentence. He conceptualizes the act of music as a "device that facilitates a perception of the past, present, and future as linked by a process of continuing personal reflection and development."<sup>57</sup> Bennett frames his ethnographic research on older British, Canadian, and Australian punks, dance music fans, and hippies through David Chaney's model of lifestyle theory, which denotes "clusters of cultural practices and attendant aesthetic sensibilities within which reflexive identities are grounded"<sup>58</sup> – essentially, how individuals can inscribe cultural resources with their own meanings. Bennett describes categories of appropriation, inscription, and presentation which are used as situating strategies for aging music audiences to enact their lifestyle projects.

The shift towards life-mapping is also apparent in Vroomen's ethnographic study of middle-aged British Kate Bush fans, "This Woman's Work: Kate Bush, Female Fans, and Practices of Distinction," which shows how women's investment with the Kate Bush fan community and the music of Kate Bush become resources for enabling maturity. Rather than viewing Kate Bush fans as part of a distinct

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<sup>56</sup> Bennett, *Music, Style, and Aging: Growing Old Disgracefully?* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 48.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 49.



subculture, Vroomen finds the entire concept of subculture problematic and suggests that contradictory identifications and practices within the “negotiation of resistance to and conformity with dominant culture”<sup>59</sup> may be what enables investments in fandoms and relationships with popular music to be sustained into adulthood.

However, the appropriateness of these studies to understanding American subcultural life may be limited because of America’s disintegrating social safety net. Bennett’s research sites, chosen for convenience and accessibility,<sup>60</sup> were all in countries with strong social safety nets. Bennett writes that aging individuals are prepared to take more risks in the pursuit of an “aesthetically fulfilling lifestyle” compatible with music fandom,<sup>61</sup> but those risks, such as self-employment to set one’s own working hours around attendance at nightclubs, may not be as desirable in the United States, where the availability of health insurance is linked to employers, wages are stagnating, and the cost of living is skyrocketing.<sup>62</sup> Being aged by culture in America may appear different indeed.

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<sup>59</sup> Laura Vroomen, “This Woman’s Work: Kate Bush, Female Fans, and Practices of Distinction,” PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 2002, 92.

<sup>60</sup> Bennett., 185.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>62</sup> The latter two conditions are by no means exclusive to America; my point is that the diminishing availability of social services in the United States could affect the priorities of middle-aged adults.

## Ethnographic Methodologies

### Ethnography in American Studies

The ethnographic aim of this project is twofold: first, to gather accurate information on Elder Goths in America and avoid the essentialization evident in the media image of Goth as a youth culture fetishizing the image of the vampire and prone to bouts of teenage melancholy and acts of violence. My second, and most important, aim in performing ethnographic research is to interact with adults who identify as Goth in a way which will allow them to conceptualize their aging processes in their own words. This thesis is situated within the ethnographic approach to American Studies, a shift which occurred in the 1970s and moved the field away from a “myth and symbol” approach to the study of American culture which generalized the nature of a singular American identity through the study of great works of literature towards the study of pluralistic American cultures. Reviewing the field in 1979, Gene Wise observes that the ethnographic turn moved beyond the assumption that there is a single American culture towards a

more discriminating consciousness that contemporary cultures function on several different levels, and in several different ways... we look upon America from a variety of different, often competing perspectives – popular culture, black culture, the culture of women, youth culture, the culture of the aged, Hispanic-American culture, American Indian culture, material culture, the culture of poverty, folk culture, the culture of regionalism, the culture of academe, the culture of literature, the culture of professionalism, etc.<sup>63</sup>

The study of style-based subcultures fits into Wise’s pluralistic approach to understanding American cultures because of their competing narratives. Hebdige,

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<sup>63</sup> Gene Wise, “Paradigm Dramas in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement,” *American Quarterly* 31 no. 3, (1979): 192.

also writing in 1979, describes “spectacular subcultures” such as punk as signifying their difference and resistance to society through stylistic innovation.<sup>64</sup> This difference and resistance is directly positioned in opposition to a mainstream culture. Within American Studies, R. Gordon Kelly and John Caughey, heavily influenced by Berger and Luckmann’s concept of social construction of reality as well as contemporary anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz, respectively introduced ideas that social structures mediate between literature and culture<sup>65</sup> and that fieldwork approaches to American studies are valid for understanding American culture and should be adapted from sociology and anthropology. Although the majority of scholarly studies on Goth have an ethnographic element, their general focus as previously described is on analyzing Goth culture as a whole rather than focusing on the lives, thoughts, and opinions of individual Goths. Hodkinson in particular is most concerned with presenting Goth as a collective aging community rather than a site of individualized expressions of identity or processes of identity formation.

#### Ethnographic Approaches to the Study of Aging Subcultures

In “Dark Admissions,” Gunn outlines two qualitative fieldwork approaches to subcultural studies: a sociological approach which replaces ethnography with structuralist, semiotic readings which focus on determining a singular subcultural ideology, and an anthropological approach based on the reflexive and self-critical

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<sup>64</sup> Hebdige, 99.

<sup>65</sup> R. Gordon Kelly, “Literature and the Historian,” *American Quarterly* 26, no.2 (1974).

modes emerging from the works of Clifford Geertz and James Clifford in the 1980s.<sup>66</sup>

This latter method

tends to emphasize ethnology and participant observation, often with an eye toward producing empathetic accounts of subcultural resistance from the ground up. These accounts are usually highly descriptive and tend to venerate subcultural subjects as exhibiting behaviors typical and expected of them given the norms of their culture... Central to these new modes of ethnography is an emphasis on the inseparability of the poetic and the political, the interpenetration of “academic and literary genres’ of reportage, and the necessarily subjective, socially constructive nature of all descriptive writing (Clifford 1986, 2)

Gunn’s description of the two approaches is of particular interest because the majority of studies of the Goth subculture include an ethnographic element through participant-observation at nightclubs as sites of fieldwork, but few studies look beyond the nightclub when understanding the Gothic experience. According to Hodkinson, the primary element of participation in the subculture is attendance at nightclub events, which provide a space for collective consumption, appreciation of shared tastes, and competitive sharing of subcultural styles,<sup>67</sup> and this thesis project frames the nightclub as a cultural landscape, described by Paul Groth as “the history of how people have used everyday space – buildings, rooms, streets, fields, or yards – to establish their identity, articulate social relations, and derive cultural meaning.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Gunn, 42.

<sup>67</sup> Hodkinson, *Goth*, 92.

<sup>68</sup> Paul Groth, "Frameworks for Cultural Landscape Study," in Paul Groth & Todd Bressi, eds., *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 1.

Anthropologist Deborah D'Amico-Samuels argues that "the field is everywhere," with no division between home and fieldwork because both home and field are situated within the context of capitalist power relations.<sup>69</sup> As the research for this thesis has occurred in areas which I live in and frequent in Baltimore City and Baltimore County, the division between home and fieldwork is literally nonexistent. The power relations that frame my informants' life choices involve their decision to create lifeways which mix their middle class upbringing with the desire "to be weird and freaky."

Based on participant-observation and interview research, this thesis follows Gunn's description of an anthropological approach, and the "narrative ethnography" described by cultural anthropologists Jeffrey A. Sluka and Antonius C.G.M. Robben: "a creative intermingling of life experiences, field data, methodological reflections, and cultural analysis by a situated and self-conscious narrator."<sup>70</sup> Sociologist Nicola Smith underscores the importance of performing narrative analysis in the study of aging musical cultures, making note of the conflicting role of the music fan-turned-researcher, whose attempts to separate personal comprehension and knowledge from being a fan with the data obtained from ethnographic analysis may be impossible, and the ethics of studying a scene consisting of peers for academic gain.<sup>71</sup> Although Smith

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<sup>69</sup> Deborah D'Amico-Samuels, quoted in James A. Sluka and Antonius C.G.M. Robben, "Fieldwork in Cultural Anthropology: An Introduction," in *Ethnographic Fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, editors James A. Sluka and Antonius C.G.M. Robben (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 24-25.

<sup>70</sup> James A. Sluka and Antonius C.G.M. Robben, "Fieldwork in Cultural Anthropology," in *Ethnographic Fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, editors James A. Sluka and Antonius C.G.M. Robben (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 19.

<sup>71</sup> Smith., 443.

argues somewhat unpersuasively that narrative analysis holds the keys to resolving these ethical conundrums - “the implicit innocence and personal sentiment of one’s own story-telling dilutes the need for the researcher to openly and directly probe sensitive areas of cultural involvement”<sup>72</sup> – how is oneself considered innocent, and how is it implicit? - narrative analysis remains important for understanding musical cultures to separate the anthropological, ethnographic approach from sociological and semiotic analyses.

When contextualized within American Studies, this thesis follows the work of Caughey, whose article “The Ethnography of Everyday Life: Theories and Methods for American Culture” advocates for the study of everyday life within American Studies by adapting sociological and anthropological methodologies, as well as discussing the need for the innovation of methodological techniques specifically for American Studies research.<sup>73</sup> Acknowledging the shortcomings of sociological approaches, Caughey writes: “The Americanist fieldworker will wish to attend to ... the community not just as an abstract system, either of knowledge or functioning elements, but as a set of human individuals whose particular lives constitute the actual stuff of everyday lives.”<sup>74</sup> This “actual stuff” of everyday lives – what Goths wear at home and at the workplaces, the appearances of their homes, the stories that they tell

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 444.

<sup>73</sup> Caughey’s approach is informed by his preference and passion for life writing and life history research in understanding American cultures. In *Negotiating Cultures and Identities*, Caughey provides a twenty-six step model for researching and understanding the multiple cultural traditions of others through comparisons with the researcher’s own cultural traditions and social worlds.

<sup>74</sup> Caughey, “The Ethnography of Everyday Life,” 30.

about their lives – are the pieces of ethnographic data that are the most meaningful in shaping an understanding of how Goths conceptualize their own aging processes. Drawing conclusions on the meaning of Goth in adulthood solely by observing clothing styles and behavior at nightclub events only serves to reiterate existing sociological research.

### Queer Theorizing

As a central concern of queer theorizing is destabilizing identity categories and foundational social and cultural ideas, identity categories corresponding with age are ripe for dismantling. Queer<sup>75</sup> understandings of identity emphasize the fluid and reject the fixed and stable, corresponding with Gullette's conception of viewing aging as a narrative which should avoid othering past selves, and Bennett's perspective on aging and subcultures as an ongoing identity project. Emerging out of Queer Studies, a paradigm for thinking about sexuality which emerged in the early 1990s and critiquing normative models of sex, gender, and sexuality,<sup>76</sup> queer theory's commitment to non-normativity<sup>77</sup> allows for its applicability to "spectacular subcultures"<sup>78</sup> differentiated from the norm by shared styles and tastes. The application of queer theorizing to case studies of heterosexual Goths may seem contentious. Queer theory was born out of historical inequity, struggle, and violence.

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<sup>75</sup> I use the word "queer" in this project only when referring specifically to academic terms ("queer temporalities," "queering," etc.) or subcultural activities involving the gay and lesbian nightclub Grand Central.

<sup>76</sup> Donald E. Hall and Annamarie Jagose, Introduction to *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2012), xvi.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Hebdige, 99.

The Elder Goths in this study have not suffered the same economic and societal marginalization as the queer community. I do not intend to appropriate queer theory in this project, and I want to be clear that I do not identify them as queer or suggest that they have been oppressed in the same ways. I use queer theory as a lens to examine and deconstruct social and subcultural aging by situating normativity inside of the heterosexual matrix. What is considered societally normative – in this project, middle class American lifeways - is determined by those in positions of power. Judith Butler conceptualizes this system of power as part of a heterosexual matrix; a “grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized.”<sup>79</sup> Michael Warner writes that “‘queer’” defines itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual,<sup>80</sup> and the lifeways my informants described as “nightmarish,” such as living in a gated suburban community, are naturalized by society as heteronormative. My informants have willfully, and rather cheerfully, positioned themselves against this cultural norm since they were teenagers, fending off homophobic epithets such as “art fag” and “punk faggot,”<sup>81</sup> thrown at them by their suburban high school classmates, and have reclaimed terms like “freak” and “weirdo” as celebratory forms of self-identification.

Some scholars posit that Goth presents challenges to heteronormativity. Links between Goth and queerness generally center around the subculture’s embrace of a

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<sup>79</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 308.

<sup>80</sup> Louisa Allen, “Queer(y)ing the Straight Researcher: The Relationship (?) Between Researcher Identity and Anti-Normative Knowledge,” *Feminism and Psychology* 20, no.2: 159.

<sup>81</sup> Gunn writes that male Goths, shunned by mainstream culture, are often perceived as homosexual. “Dark Admissions,” 45.



wide variety of sexual practices and performances of multiple gender identities. Goth men are drawn to behaviors associated with women; the subculture provides “opportunities to display sensitivity, emotion, theatricality, and artiness.”<sup>82</sup> According to Gunn, the dark practices of Goths directly confront heteronormativity with “androgyny and a pale, sickly body ideal.”<sup>83</sup> Goodlad and Bibby go as far as to state that Goth’s troubling the foundation of straight sexuality makes its queerness inevitable.<sup>84</sup> If the nature of Goth has the power to queer and destabilize gender and sexuality, why not age?

### Queer Temporalities

Applying queer theorizing to the Goth subculture necessitates a broad conception of queerness encompassing lifeways which are not necessarily affiliated with sexual orientation. Employing a broad conception of queerness allows heterosexuals to produce anti-normative knowledge as both researchers and subjects, even though that knowledge is still situated within the heterosexual matrix.<sup>85</sup> Jack Halberstam puts forward queerness as a concept which can be understood as having the “potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space”<sup>86</sup> in *In a Queer Time and Place*. This allows for the possibility of imagining

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<sup>82</sup> Goodlad and Bibby, 21.

<sup>83</sup> Gunn, 59.

<sup>84</sup> Goodlad and Bibby, 20.

<sup>85</sup> See Calvin Thomas, *Introduction to Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality*, and Louisa Allen, “Queering the Straight Researcher: The Relationship (?) Between Researcher Identity and Anti-Normative Knowledge,” *Feminism and Psychology* 20, no.2.

<sup>86</sup> Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005),2.

alternative life narratives outside of the dominant cultural narrative of aging. Specifically, Halberstam writes that “queer” refers to “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time.”<sup>87</sup> Halberstam introduces the terms “queer time” and “queer space” to describe models of temporality and space-making practices which emerge within postmodernism and can be used as frameworks for analyzing late-twentieth and early twenty-first century political and cultural change.<sup>88</sup> Both terms are related to how respectability and normativity is tied to middle class lifeways involving reproductive temporalities, and how alternative lifestyles are pathologized.

Halberstam defines queer time as models of temporality which emerge once one leaves the frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance,<sup>89</sup> and queer space refers to the “place making practices within post-modernism in which queer people engage, and the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics.”<sup>90</sup> Queer time and space are directly tied to subcultural activities, as queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities “by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of the paradigmatic markers of life experience.”<sup>91</sup> In doing this, Halberstam proposes to re-think the adult/youth

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 2.

subcultural binary in relation to an “epistemology of youth” that disrupts conventional accounts of youth culture, adulthood, and maturity.<sup>92</sup> Thus, queer temporalities hold the power to break down boundaries between age categories.

In making these arguments, Halberstam detaches queerness from sexual identity, suggesting a definition of queerness as “an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices.”<sup>93</sup> Cynthia Port expands on Halberstam in “No Future? Aging, Temporality, History, and Reverse Chronologies” by placing social aging and queer temporalities into conversation with each other. Through readings of Martin Amis’ *Time’s Arrow* and the film *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, Port finds resonances between queer subjectivity and aging, writing that “the old, are often, like queers, figured by the culture as being outside of mainstream temporalities and standing in the way of, rather than contributing to, the promise of the future. Beyond the accumulation of recognized milestones... read as socially meaningful or measurable, the older subject faces a shrinking horizon of future potentiality.”<sup>94</sup> Queer temporalities can provide “potentially asynchronous modes of time [which can] open up the interpretive possibilities for recognizing alternative temporalities of old age, and helping to theorize the complex intersections between age and temporality, both in the sense of

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 3.

how time is experienced or perceived, and in the sense of how available time might be filled.”<sup>95</sup>

Queer temporalities can theorize alternatives to social aging by subverting constructions of what society considers age-appropriate. Eva Krainitski’s article “Judi Dench’s Age-Inappropriateness and the Role of M: Challenging Normative Temporality” approaches the character of M in the James Bond film series as a subversion of normative concepts of age and gender roles. Although M, an older female character placed in a position of knowledge and authority, is claimed as a role model and a cultural model of defiance for aging women, the film *Skyfall* reinstitutes normative temporalities through returning to the age-appropriate narrative of decline with the character’s death. Both Port and Krainitzki underscore that the dominant narrative of aging leads to societal marginalization and ultimately to death. Examining the lived experience of Elder Goths who have chosen lifeways on the margins of mainstream society aids in imagining this alternative future and evaluating if participation in the subculture is a way for them to imagine alternative futures which subvert the cultural construction of aging.

#### Queer Phenomenology and Material Deviance

Sara Ahmed’s book *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* offers a similar queer theoretical framework to *In a Queer Time and Place*. Although *Queer*

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<sup>95</sup> Cynthia Port, “No Future? Aging, Temporality, History, and Reverse Chronologies,” *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*, Vol 4, (May 31, 2012): 5. Retrieved from <http://arcade.stanford.edu/occasion/no-future-aging-temporality-history-and-reverse-chronologies>

*Phenomenology* is specifically motivated by an interest in sexual orientation,<sup>96</sup> Ahmed's argument bears clear similarities to Halberstam's discussion of queer time and queer temporalities, and has a broader scope when applied to subcultural identities. Unlike Halberstam, she does not focus on reproductive temporalities as sole direction of orientation. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed retheorizes the concept of space by putting queer theory in dialogue with phenomenology. Ahmed links orientation to identity formation when noting "it is by following some lines more than others that we might acquire some sense of who we are."<sup>97</sup> Following deviant lines leads subcultural participants away from middle class lifeways and towards objects and others who share their interests, creating communities based on shared styles and tastes.

In addition to theorizing relationships between individuals and society, Ahmed's phenomenological focus is significant because it brings the role of objects into play. By expanding "queer" to include objects as well as romantic partners and lifeways, her research opens possibilities for ethnographic analysis which go beyond human relationships. Ahmed suggests that a queer phenomenology could redirect attention towards different objects that are less proximate or that deviate or are deviant from norms.<sup>98</sup> For Ahmed, orientation is about how the body, spatial

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<sup>96</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 3.

elements, and the social are entangled,<sup>99</sup> making the nightclub an ideal environment to analyze orientations; all three elements are prominently displayed and expressed.

Ahmed's argument for the importance of phenomenology in queer studies underscores the applicability of orientations to subcultural analysis throughout the lifespan and within the cultures of everyday life. By emphasizing lived experience, conscious intentionality, the significance of what is near and ready-to-hand, and the role of habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds,<sup>100</sup> Ahmed's take on phenomenology and orientations provides a lens to view the performative aspects of Goth as expressed within the nightclub which shapes nightclubs as spaces for social aging. Goths shape nightclub experiences through interactions with material objects in the nightclub – such as sitting on comfortable sofas and relaxing – which deviate from youth nightclub norms. In "Theorizing Queer Objecthood," Scott Herring argues that this type of interaction is a part of material deviance: "the critical negotiation of how object usage, object choice, and material conduct pathologizes, as well as normalizes individuals as having proper and improper social relations."<sup>101</sup> Herring's article is a prime example how queer theorizing can be employed to analyze topics which are not directly linked to sexuality. Building on Bill Brown's "thing theory" and queer phenomenology through a study of the A&E docudrama *Hoarders*, Herring uses queer theorizing to consider the "non-normativity of material relations."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>101</sup> Scott Herring, "Material Deviance: Theorizing Queer Objecthood," *Postmodern Culture* 21, no. 2 (January 2011). Accessed February 2016. doi: 10.1353/pmc.2011.0009

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

Spaces and individuals can be marked as deviant through the use of material objects, allowing Goths to queer nightclub spaces normally perceived as the exclusive cultural domain of youth through their relationships with the built environment and the material culture present within.

### Conclusions

After reviewing the literature, the questions in my mind at the funeral to Crystal's youth remain. What continues to attract adults to the Goth subculture, and what is the meaning of Goth for these adults? Hodkinson's sociological analysis of aging British Goths (as well as his work on Goths overall) functions as an insider observation of Goth as a collectively aging community as opposed to a set of individuals. Hodkinson is more concerned with the display and maintenance of subcultural style and behaviors than the reasons for doing so or exploring subcultural meaning or ideologies. Smith argues that the continuing attraction of adults to youth subcultures is the continued achievement of "scene-specific status,"<sup>103</sup> but Smith's argument is heavily based on her view of subcultures as pleasure-oriented participation<sup>104</sup> with no deeper meaning. Smith views the nightclub as the sole site of subcultural participation and is not interested in what goes on outside of nightclubs, or how subcultural identities are internalized. An ethnographic perspective on identities outside of the club moves towards understanding how ideologies can change as we do. Emerging research by Bennett and Vroomen on the study of aging

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<sup>103</sup> Smith, 436.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 435.

subcultures moves towards viewing aging as part of a lifespan project, but neither scholar has performed research in America.

More questions arise when considering social aging. Gullette argues that we are aged by culture; if not, Crystal's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday would be no more worthy of an elaborate fake funeral to her youth than her 39<sup>th</sup>. Sociological analyses view subcultures on the macro level; but how do Goths conceptualize their own aging processes as distinct from others? How do they make sense of their individual lives? Is there possibility for resistance through transgressions of age appropriate dress and/or forms of age appropriate lifestyles and behavior? An ethnographic perspective focusing on the cultures of everyday life will work towards answering these questions. Our words, thoughts, and performances of the everyday reveal deeper meanings than observations and survey research at nightclubs. Ethnographic research is crucial to this project to let Goths speak in their own words about their own lives. Employing queer theorizing as a model for subcultural research opens a door to deconstructing age categories.



### Chapter 3: Goth and Aging in the American Imaginary

This chapter provides a brief overview of Goth in American culture from the 1990s to the present before examining the role of aging and the Elder Goth in the IFC television comedy series *Portlandia*, which satirizes subcultures and hipster culture. Although my informants began their participation in the Goth subculture in the late 1980s, when formative British Gothic bands such as the Cure, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and the Sisters of Mercy were touring and gaining more recognition in the U.S., I focus on the 1990s because of the lingering after effects of the Columbine high school massacre which have strongly shaped American perceptions on Goth culture. I examine *Portlandia* as a contemporary representation of middle-aged and middle class heteronormative and subcultural lifeways. Understanding how Goth is currently portrayed in American culture situates the lived experiences of my informants in a cultural context. The queer, alternative temporalities which middle-aged *Portlandia* characters exhibit, as well as the perspective of the show's middle-aged lead actor Carrie Brownstein on singlehood as a life choice, reflect the role of the Goth subculture as a form of community and chosen family for my informants.

#### Goth in Mainstream American Culture

There is a distinct binary present in the popular imaginary on Goth in American mainstream culture. From an outsider perspective, Goth is portrayed as a subject of antagonism, terror, and fear. The first results in a cursory Google search for “Goth in American culture” are conservative religious websites capitalizing on the

eternal moral panic of parents raising teenagers. From “Goth Culture Will Destroy Your Teen – Jesus is Savior,” a site chock full of erroneous information prominently displaying 1990s shock rocker Marilyn Manson, the Columbine massacre, and the non-Goth rap group Insane Clown Posse as poster children for murderous teenage Goths; to the *Christian Research Journal* article “The World According to Goth,” an extremely detailed summary of Goth culture concluding with the most effective ways to evangelize to youth, Goth is an enemy of culture. Interspersed with these sites are homegrown web pages produced by Goths to dispel the negative perception of their subculture. If one is not a Goth, the cultural goal is eradication (or at best a type of morbid curiosity); if one is a Goth, the eternal role becomes to defend the subculture against incorrect and bizarre accusations.

Goth is most often associated in mainstream popular culture with Marilyn Manson, a heavy metal musician and artist who burst on the music scene in St. Petersburg, Florida in 1993 fronting the band Marilyn Manson and the Spooky Kids. Born Brian Warner, in Canton, Ohio, Manson’s cult following exploded into the mainstream with the release of the album *Antichrist Superstar* in 1995. The legitimacy of Manson as a Goth in musical sound and appearance is a topic of intense debate within the subculture, with Goths who belonged to the subculture before the late 1980s viewing him as a poseur.<sup>105</sup> Much to the horror of parents, Manson, together with industrial musician Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails, portrayed a Gothic

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<sup>105</sup> Hodkinson, “‘We are all individuals, but we’ve all got the same boots on!’: Traces of Individualism within a Subcultural Community,” in *Goth: Undead Subculture*, edited by Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 327; Siegel, “That Obscure Object of Desire Revisited: Poppy Z. Brite and Goth Hero as Masochist,” in *Goth: Undead Subculture*, edited by Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 344.

aesthetic which was less vampire and Victorian and more bondage, violence, and anger, accompanied by licentious “rock star” behavior such as copious amounts of drug use and destruction of property while on tour. As the most visible face of what was perceived to be Goth by the mainstream, Manson’s musical career was adversely affected by the Columbine massacre despite the fact that gunmen Harris and Klebold were not fans of his music. In response to the shootings, Manson wrote a piece for *Rolling Stone* describing himself as a scapegoat for the tragedy while distinguishing himself from Goth: “Those two idiots weren’t wearing makeup and they weren’t dressed like me or like Goths. Since middle America has not heard of the music they do listen to (KMFDM and Rammstein among others), the media picked something they thought was similar.”<sup>106</sup>

Moving into the 2000s, Gothic images variously flourished and faded in the mainstream, with a flurry of scholarship published in the mid to late 2000s primarily focusing on Gothic and horror literature and British culture; the interdisciplinary academic journal *Gothic Studies* was established in Manchester, England in 1999. Gothic themes most recently appeared in American culture in the early 2010s with the merchandising juggernaut surrounding Stephanie Meyer’s young adult vampire-human romance *Twilight* and consumer products such as the *Monster High* children’s dolls.

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<sup>106</sup> Marilyn Manson, “Columbine: Whose Fault Is It?” *Rolling Stone*, June 24, 1999. <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/columbine-whose-fault-is-it-19990624>

### Temporalities of Aging in Portlandia

According to Naomi Richards et. al, visual representations of aging are important because they “capture and constrain our imagination, giving forecast of what we can expect as well as a prescription for how we want to live later in life.”<sup>107</sup> Without these images, we are left unmoored, and images of the Elder Goth in American popular culture are conspicuously absent. Portrayals of the Goth subculture in American media are youth oriented by nature. From Fairuza Balk’s Wiccan character Nancy in the 1996 horror film *The Craft*, to the Goth and vampire themed television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the *Twilight* novel and film series, and the annual Goth themed episode of *South Park*, Goth is associated with stereotypical tropes of darkness, witchcraft, vampirism, or in the case of *South Park*, gentle satirizing and mockery – but above all, affiliation with Goth is associated with youth and marketed towards youth.

When compared with Goths, rockers are allowed to age, and age successfully, in the cultural imaginary. Bennett argues that rock musicians such as Paul McCartney and the Rolling Stones are held up as role models and style icons for aging adults,<sup>108</sup> and television has become a tool for aging rock stars to revitalize their careers. The prime example is the Emmy winning MTV reality show *The Osbournes* (2002-2005), which captured the expletive filled but loving domestic life of Black Sabbath singer Ozzy Osbourne, then in his late 50s. The show’s comedic value centered around the bumbling Osbourne’s challenges of maintaining the rock and roll lifestyle and his

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<sup>107</sup> Naomi Richards, Lorna Warren, and Merryn Gott, “The challenge of creating ‘alternative’ images of ageing: Lessons from a project with older women,” *Journal of Aging Studies* 26, no. 1 (January 2012): 66.

<sup>108</sup> Bennett, *Music, Style, and Aging*, 25.

corresponding reputation as the “Prince of Darkness” with fulfilling his familial responsibilities to his manager-wife and teenaged children. Rather than portraying an image of the aging rock star life as a form of non-normativity, *The Osbournes* is grounded in the nuclear family unit as a social institution, ultimately showing that aging rockers - or at least aging male rockers - can “have it all”: the fame, the successful career, the mansion, and the happy family life. Alternatively, reality television allows aging rockers to serve as experts in their field, with 67 year old musician Steven Tyler judging aspiring young singers on the competition show *American Idol* in 2011 and 2012 while continuing to perform and tour with Aerosmith. Rather than being relegated to a relic or a victim of ageism in the workplace, Tyler’s age and 45 years of experience in the music industry are viewed as assets.

When juxtaposed against these images of sanctioned aging for real-life rockers, Elder Goth becomes an anomaly, an age-inappropriate aberration which is perhaps partly reflective of the media’s unwillingness to depict fictional middle-aged adults as desirable. Fictional rockers have not aged in the imaginary as well as Osbourne and Tyler. Portrayals of aging rock stars in American culture, such as Denis Leary’s 2015 FX television show *Sex&Drugs&Rock&Roll*, correspond with the dominant decline narrative, with plot lines centering around out of control rock musicians trying to recapture their former glory. Because Goths and rock stars are aged by culture, it is unsurprising that the most detailed representations of Elder Goth are in a comedy television show.

The IFC sketch comedy television series *Portlandia* is a prime example of the tensions between middle class lifeways and subcultural membership. In the series, Saturday Night Live alumnus Fred Armisen, 49, and guitarist Carrie Brownstein, 41, of the riot grrrl band Sleater-Kinney, portray a variety of middle-aged couples in a fictionalized version of Portland, Oregon. Long known as a bastion of alternative culture, Portland is marketed by the civic organization “Travel Portland” with the city’s unofficial slogan “Keep Portland Weird,” and the show is used as a marketing tool to attract tourists. Based on Brownstein’s experiences as a lifelong resident of the Pacific Northwest, with characters drawn from her experiences of the insularity of and judgment present in the local punk rock scene, *Portlandia*’s subtext spoofs the extreme political correctness and obsession with minutiae present in a privileged, primarily white, middle to upper middle class demographic which Brownstein describes to *Salon* as “having the level of privilege and class to have the ability to curate your life.”<sup>109</sup>

*Portlandia*’s couples run the gamut of middle class American life. The show explores the dynamics of platonic friendships and romantic relationships between middle-aged (and mostly middle class) adults in a city well known for – and proud of – its commitment to “independence, creativity, and nonconformity.”<sup>110</sup> Armisen and Brownstein both play male and female characters, and Brownstein, who is bisexual, describes *Portlandia* in an interview with *Bust* as “a very weird, kind of queer

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<sup>109</sup> David Daley, “Portlandia’s Carrie Brownstein: “I Want to Poke, Prod, and Prick People,” *Salon*, March 6, 2014, [http://www.salon.com/2014/03/07/portlandias\\_carrie\\_brownstein\\_i\\_want\\_to\\_poke\\_and\\_prod\\_and\\_prick\\_people/](http://www.salon.com/2014/03/07/portlandias_carrie_brownstein_i_want_to_poke_and_prod_and_prick_people/)

<sup>110</sup> <https://www.travelportland.com/collection/keep-portland-weird/>

feminist show sometimes... Because our show's a comedy, we can explore duality and contradiction without being too didactic.”<sup>111</sup>

Queer temporalities are particularly present throughout the show when viewed in terms of aging. The characters which Armisen and Brownstein play are a mix of members of distinct style-based subcultures (punks, hippies, feminist bookstore owners) and more societally conforming heterosexual couples dealing with relationship struggles and rites of passage for the middle-aged, such as parenting, lack of sexual relations, commitment issues, and greying hair. Two couples in the show, platonic life mates Fred and Carrie, and the romantic pair of Elder Goths Vince and Jacquelin, express forms of alternative temporalities which provide alternatives to the narrative of age as decline.

#### Fred and Carrie: Age Anxiety Writ Large

Greying hair is an immediate sign of panic for non-subcultural characters Fred and Carrie, who live in a platonic relationship and share a bedroom with two twin beds in a large home. In the episode “Going Grey,” Fred, played by Armisen, is thrown into a state of denial about his age when he’s woken up one morning by Carrie’s screaming – his hair has suddenly turned grey overnight! Fred refuses to accept that he is 49 years old, and is adamant that he is in his early thirties, embarking on a mid-life crisis series of events: returning to his grade school teacher for guidance and continually relocating to other cities in a futile search for validation before returning to Portland.

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<sup>111</sup> Lisa Butterworth, “Carrie Brownstein Spills the Beans on Fred, Feminism, and Fear,” *Bust*, August/September 2014, <http://bust.com/general/12733-carrie-brownstein-spills-the-beans-on-fred-feminism-and-fear.html>

Carrie's simultaneous mid-life crisis hinges around the decision whether or not to have children. After an unsuccessful attempt at sex with Fred, being repeatedly insulted by a male gynecologist for being without a sexual partner in her 40s, and her brief experience as a foster parent to the Mayor's children, the episode culminates with Carrie staging a wedding ceremony in the following episode celebrating getting her tubes tied, signifying an acceptance that she is content to be an "old spinster" living with Fred. When Fred arrives at the ceremony, he details his acceptance of being 49, and suggests that the two get married on the spot, which they both laughingly decline, and he gets a vasectomy instead. Fred chooses to dye his hair black and accept that he is aging by living in denial.

Although Fred and Carrie conform to a stylistic norm and are not part of a style-based subculture, their living situation represents one form of an alternative temporality of middle age, rejecting romantic entanglements and childrearing in favor of a loving but nonsexual relationship. Fred and Carrie have both dated other characters on the show but always become disillusioned and continue to return to their platonic relationship as their true love. Their alternative imaginary includes an acceptance of their aging selves and happiness with their life choices, which extends to Armisen and Brownstein's lived experience outside of *Portlandia*. Despite endless media speculation, Armisen and Brownstein, who has primarily been in romantic relationships with women, are not a romantic couple. They describe each other as their platonic soul mates, and both speak of contentment with being unmarried and childless in middle age. In an NPR interview with Terry Gross, Brownstein is quite



clear that rejecting a nuclear familial relationship is a form of creating a “family of choice”:

The idea of a nuclear family to me is so illusory and foreign. But at the same time, I'm not someone who feels lonely. I see family as a constellation of friends or lovers or people who embody compassion, kindness, openness and allowance for faults and contradictions. And I guess, you know, just through various means provide a sense of belonging... So you have to find people with whom you feel seen, and that's what family is to me, I guess, is being around people who make you feel seen.<sup>112</sup>

#### Jacquelin and Vince: Gothic Temporalities

In the *Portlandia* universe, Elder Goths Jacquelin (Brownstein) and Vince (Armisen) present an alternative imaginary to the prospect of aging as decline leading to an ultimately unwanted terminus through their association with the Goth subculture. The characters first appear in the episode “SeaWorld,” detailing their wills and funeral plans to a cheerful middle-aged female lawyer. Jacquelin and Vince are the epitome of 1990s Gothic styles, sporting black clothes, black wigs, skull accessories, and heavy white makeup with black accents. The pair plan to leave their personal possessions (all of which have a Gothic flavor and are comically extreme in nature – i.e. “the tears of a Scottish deerhound”) to each other, insinuating no close familial relationships or even close friendships. They are forced to hold public auditions in the lawyer’s office to determine who will take care of Bella, their pet bat. As their funeral ideas grow more elaborate and macabre, their lawyer becomes more perturbed and suggests more practical plans, but ultimately acquiesces to their wishes.

Rather than viewing aging and funeral plans as an end to life, Jacquelin and Vince’s queer temporality revels in planning the end of life – which for Goths, may

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<sup>112</sup> Carrie Brownstein, interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, NPR, October 27, 2015. <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=452204158>

not be a true end at all. If, as Shumway and Arnet argue, the macabre Goth aesthetic should be understood as a desire for some alternative world rather than an extinction of the self,<sup>113</sup> Jacquelin and Vince's funeral planning is a part of a continuum of existence; an alternative imaginary where aging is not an end. The shock and comedic value of disturbing non-Goths with their plans to be left to rot on a hill rather than buried represents an alternative temporality to social aging shaped by Gothic images and values.

This view of a queer temporality through the lens of Goth can provide a partial answer to Eva Krainitzki's question at the end of her article "Judi Dench's Age-Inappropriateness and the Role of M: Challenging Normative Temporality": "Would it be possible to resist *Skyfall*'s age appropriate-narrative closure and imagine an alternative future for M?"<sup>114</sup> Death is an exit – and the only age-appropriate exit – available for M. Portlandia's Goths are more passive-aggressive seekers of attention than M's culturally defiant role model for older women, but conceptualizing the narrative of aging through a Gothic temporality allows an aging character's decline – terminating in death – to become something other than an end.

In addition to challenging social aging as a decline, *Portlandia*'s Elder Goths subvert the norm through their strong, almost desperate identification with the non-normative. In the episode "Weirdo Beach," Jacquelin and Vince's deep need to be perceived as "weird" by others (who now show acceptance by smiling at them) leads them to decide go to the beach instead of the new graveyard in town. Their Goth garb,

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<sup>113</sup> Shumway and Arnet, 139.

<sup>114</sup> Krainitzki, 39.

the most visible sign of their subcultural membership, becomes comedic fodder for the first time in the series. At a rental car agency after performing a memorial for their broken down hearse, Vince struggles with retrieving his wallet from his long black coat and asks Jacquelin to pay the agent, complaining “this is why we do stuff online, so I don’t have to take off all of these clothes.” Their attempts to “be weird” leave the agent unperturbed. Once the couple cluelessly arrives at the beach, an elderly Romanian Goth played by heavy metal musician Glenn Danzig gives Vince some brightly colored clothes, telling him “Sometimes to have a good time, you have to dress a little lame.” Jacquelin and Vince appear to love their new colorful clothing and celebrate by playing football on the beach. However, although these “lame” bright colors may be fun, they are also fleeting: by the end of the episode Jacquelin and Vince are back at home in their everyday Goth wear: black upon black with skull accents. Sartorial expressions of normativity are a diversion, not a longtime lifestyle change; visual displays of subcultural identity are far more important than having a normative idea of fun.

But their choice to be visibly deviant has severe consequences. Even though Jacquelin and Vince feel that they are not perceived as “weird” anymore by the locals, law enforcement in Portland disagrees, and the couple experiences discrimination and criminal charges for their choice to seek attention for their public displays of weirdness. When the Portland police are called to investigate the arson of a taxidermy shop in the episode “Dead Pets,” they immediately round up all the weirdos – including artists building doll head sculptures, video game fans, and of course, Goths Jacquelin and Vince, who are arrested for providing a confusing definition of the word

August. Their defense lawyer, played by Paul Reubens (best known as the actor behind the character Pee-Wee Herman), preaches in defense of the weirdos as groundbreakers in ways which appeal to the privileged culture of *Portlandia* – “the first people to eat kale, the first people to try marijuana!” – when a group of young, white ecoterrorists dressed in brightly colored outfits enters the courtroom and confesses to the arson in song. Even on a show which prominently features subcultural members who mainstream culture may consider weird, Elder Goths are portrayed in the *Portlandia* universe as the weirdest of the weirdos.

### Conclusions

Portrayals of Goth in American popular culture cannot be separated from youth. Just as aging characters are filled with anxiety about aging and ultimately constructed as undesirable, the few Elder Goths in popular culture are marginalized, discriminated against, and eventually criminalized for their age inappropriate dress and behavior. In *Portlandia*, Jacquelin and Vince present an alternative to biological decline by celebrating Gothic values, creating an alternative, Gothic temporality of aging where morbidity and funeral planning present new options for conceptualizing the lifespan. For Goths, the narrative of aging is not to be feared.

## Chapter 4: “Blue Collar Goth”: Identities Outside of the Club

In this chapter, I examine the life courses of three Baltimore-based Elder Goths from adolescence to the present. After geographically contextualizing this study within the city of Baltimore, which has historically embraced eccentric and societally deviant adult identities, I incorporate their age autobiographies through use of the ethnographic interview to let the stories of their life paths emerge in their own words. This examination centers around three ethnographic case studies of their identities as expressed within the workplace and concludes by discussing how they envision their futures. The lives of these Elder Goths present a seemingly contradictory mix of middle class lifeways and Halberstam’s queer temporalities common to subcultural membership, both of which are filtered through a lens of darkness: a Gothic temporality. Rather than defining themselves solely by the spectacular styles of their youth, each Goth in this study navigates through the challenges of adult life and subverts the cultural narrative of aging by creating an individualized Gothic identity.

### Contextualizing Baltimore

Made famous as the home of 1970s cult filmmaker John Waters and the late transgender star Divine,<sup>115</sup> both icons of shock and eccentricity, Baltimore has a reputation for embracing the deviant. Often overshadowed by its larger, brasher neighboring cities on the Eastern seaboard, Baltimore’s relative affordability and compact size have made it a safe haven for eccentrics well into adulthood. “It doesn’t

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<sup>115</sup> Full disclosure: both Waters and Divine were born and raised in suburban Baltimore County.

matter if you're weird, this is Baltimore" is a common local catchphrase for when describing city life. Linda is especially glad to have a scene "with people who are my age and maybe a little older, who are still living life on their own terms, where they said 'I'm older but I still want to go out, I still want to listen to wild and crazy music, I still want to look freaky.'" This internalized feeling of affinity with "being freaky" is so strong that Linda, whose short hair was dyed bright pink, was visibly uncomfortable among an affluent crowd when she attended a Skydivers show at an upscale venue in Annapolis, Maryland in September 2015, remarking to me on the rooftop bar that "I'm so used to city eccentrics that I don't know what to do around these people."

Although flamboyant sartorial styles are embraced in Baltimore on an everyday basis, Baltimore Goth is unique because the boundaries of the scene are not currently style-based, making the city an ideal site to examine how Gothic identities are expressed and understood beyond nightclubs. The subdued styles in Baltimore differ from the performative aspects of Goth which are apparent in other American cities. Ryan Rhea's 2005 documentary *American Goth* presents the Goth subculture in St. Louis, Missouri as a site of perpetual heightened performance. Rhea's adult Goths wax rhapsodic about themes of vampires and darkness to spooky low-fi background music, and generally come across as a makeup-covered theatrical bunch fitting Dunja Brill's descriptions of Gothic dress in the late 1990s: elaborately modelled, long, black dyed hair, effeminate male clothing styles, delicate fabrics,

Victorian-inspired dress, skinny-fit clothes, skirts, and lots of black jewelry with crosses, magical symbols, skulls, and bats.<sup>116</sup>

Over the past twenty years, the Baltimore scene has self-segregated from the neighboring Washington, D.C. scene which holds more frequent events: the weekly event Spellbound and monthly event Midnight, both held at neighborhood bars temporarily transformed into spaces for Gothic identities. With a more highly educated and transient population than Baltimore, the D.C. scene is very restrictive and appearance based; a clubgoer who wears street clothes to Spellbound is viewed with disdain for not conforming to Gothic styles. Neska describes Baltimore events as very inclusive: “I think that’s another thing that makes Baltimore a little bit unique, in that it’s not costume oriented here. Everybody dresses a little bit different. Look at the crowd [at Batz] last night, there’s jeans, there’s t-shirts, there’s cowboy hats, there’s lots of kilts! ... It’s not really fashion oriented... We’re not corporate Goth [like Goths in D.C. who make a lot of money], we’re blue collar Goth!”

Baltimore’s “blue collar Goth” is tied into the city’s working class identity. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, young Goths who came from a wealthy background were looked down upon by their peers, who cobbled together outfits from thrift stores. Roy Retrofit of the synthrock band Red This Ever describes his hometown of Baltimore as “weird, subdued, and welcoming”; a city where his trailer park background isn’t a basis for judgment and class boundaries seem to be an illusion because he and his wife Ada are surrounded by people who have “let go of the idea

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<sup>116</sup> Brill, 4.

that they're going to be extraordinarily wealthy and just live with the mantra of enjoying their lives... We live like kings, because we love what we're doing!"

Waters's Baltimore is a quirky, working class city with pink flamingos in the front yard and marble stoops glistening on streets lined with historic rowhomes. These images of eccentricity and the proximity of nightclubs led Linda and Neska to choose an urban lifestyle, both moving into the city when they were in their late 20s. Linda achieved her goal of moving into Hampden, a predominantly white former mill town full of boutiques, galleries, and bars which has served as an inspiration for Waters,<sup>117</sup> who presciently described the neighborhood to the *Baltimore Sun* as an "uneasy mixture of redneck culture and hipster culture."<sup>118</sup> Neska has rented the same studio apartment in the nearby Charles Village, a more racially diverse middle class area which neighbors the Johns Hopkins University, for twelve years, commuting all over the state for daytime employment, while Michael has remained a suburban dweller, living with his wife and family in a single family home in a quiet part of Cockeysville, the suburb where he and Neska attended high school.

Throughout this project, my surprise grew as I found out how much my life history has in common with my informants. All of us grew up in the Baltimore area and have lived in Cockeysville, a historic town fifteen miles north of the city which has been rapidly swallowed in the past fifty years by suburban sprawl, and straddles the edge of suburbia and the beginning of rural northern Baltimore County. All of us

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<sup>117</sup> Deborah Tunney, "Hampden: Now That's Baltimore," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 25, 1998. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/travel/index/stories/tunney10251998.htm>

<sup>118</sup> Michael Sragow, "The Education of John Waters," *The Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), May 21, 2010. [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2010-05-21/entertainment/bs-ae-waters-book-20100520\\_1\\_john-waters-tennessee-williams-role-models/3](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2010-05-21/entertainment/bs-ae-waters-book-20100520_1_john-waters-tennessee-williams-role-models/3)



grew up in middle class households. And most important for this project, our impressions of middle class normativity are shaped by the public high school that three of us attended, Dulaney High School, commonly and erroneously known in the local lexicon as “the rich kids’ high school” because of its location in the Dulaney Valley area of Timonium, which was white and upper middle class in the 1960s but rapidly became more ethnically diverse when the surrounding historic estates were sold to apartment developers in the late 1970s. The apartments in Timonium and Cockeysville are now home to a mix of young white and African-American families, college students from the nearby Towson University, government subsidized housing for low-income Baltimoreans, and immigrants from Asia, India, and Mexico.<sup>119</sup> The snooty “Dulaney Valley” attitude which families who have been longtime residents display continues to ignore these demographic changes, and Dulaney’s local reputation as a high school for wealthy white families remains intact despite clear evidence to the contrary.

The longer I spoke with Michael and Neska, the easier it was to picture them sitting in the school cafeteria with the same group of teenage outcasts with whom I shared my lunch breaks ten years later. And growing up ten years later is the key to unpacking our differences and framing this project. My informants, who range from ages 40-48, are considered part of the much-maligned “Generation X” – a category which Gullette argues has been culturally constructed as a way to divide the public

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<sup>119</sup> With respective median family incomes of \$64,473 and \$81,865 in the 2010 census, Cockeysville and Timonium remain some of the more expensive and desirable Baltimore suburbs to raise a family. The true “rich kids” who live in the Baltimore area attend private schools. Since the 1990s, the expensive homes in the area have been built further out into the countryside or northwards towards Pennsylvania.

and the workforce against each other.<sup>120</sup> Cohort naming, such as “Xers,” “Boomers,” and now “Millennial,”<sup>121</sup> serves the function of fracturing the life course and generational unity. “Xers” were first constructed by the media as lazy “slackers” and then as sympathetic individuals, with the effect of framing the then-midlife “Baby Boomers” as unhappy middle-agers rapidly on the path to irrelevancy.<sup>122</sup>

But Gullette does not imply that there are no differences between people of different ages. Born in 1982, my age floats between generational categories – I am too young to be considered Generation X and too old to be a Millennial, growing up in a nether region of age which is neglected by the media’s generational separations – and the Goth subculture seemed somewhat different for people around my age. At one point during our interview, Michael laughingly turned the tables and asked me “How many Goths your age or younger do you know? Like five?” - implying that Goth had changed so much in the eight years between our high school graduation dates that it was no longer recognizable, or that the subculture had simply vanished. My high school years were spent in the shadow of the Columbine massacre, when Goth was inscribed in the cultural imaginary as a youth cult affiliated with violence and witchcraft rather than dark music and a collection of macabre fashion styles drawn from early ‘80s musicians, pirates, and Poe. And the answer to Michael’s question is “none.” Although many of my acquaintances were accused of being Goths because of their trench coats and t-shirts with heavy metal band logos interspersed

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<sup>120</sup> Gullette, 43-45.

<sup>121</sup> Interestingly, Gullette also predicts the name given to the following constructed cohort – “Millenial.”

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 57.

with flames and crosses, I never knew any Goths. I just heard rumors that there was a Goth club downtown called the Orpheus - the nightclub where my informants were spending their young adulthood during the same time period, and sorting through the confusions of life by growing up Goth.

The local commonalities I shared with my informants gave me the advantage of understanding the normative structures which my informants have chosen to shape their lives against. The cultural signifiers which they repeatedly mentioned in interviews - “alligator shirts,” “lacrosse jackets,” “driving a [expletive] Lexus,” “Brooks Brothers suits” - add up to a specific image of white, heterosexual, middle class structures portrayed as desirable by the mass media and local surroundings. These icons of normativity are all dependent on what Halberstam describes as a “middle-class logic of reproductive temporality.”<sup>123</sup> But the Gothic signifiers which they also mentioned add up to an alternative temporality – a Gothic temporality – composed of music, style, and a certain attitude where, in Linda’s words, “at the root of it, you have to be someone that likes things that most people just don’t like... because [those things are] too dark.” The dark things that Linda likes are black clothes, spiders, cemeteries, and most of all, Gothic music. According to Gunn, Gothic music is innately linked to self-description and self-identity: “the significations of darkness [in Goth music] are drawn on to create fantasies of identity that help to sustain a persona distinct from a perceived mainstream.”<sup>124</sup> Gothic rock bands from the early 1980s like Dead Can Dance, Sisters of Mercy, and Bauhaus

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<sup>123</sup> Halberstam, 4.

<sup>124</sup> Gunn, 45.

repeatedly recur as references along their life paths. These bands are tied to darkness through their morbid lyrics, intense and passionate music, and the highly influential image which inspired the corresponding subcultural style. Jacques Attali writes that “the only thing common to all music is that it gives structure to noise,”<sup>125</sup> arguing that society’s musical process of structuring noise into music is also the political process of structuring community. In a study of middle-aged queers’ involvement in music scenes, Jodie Taylor argues that the temporal qualities of music and the ‘youthful’ qualities associated with subcultural participation suggest that music is a contributing factor in queering temporalities of middle age.<sup>126</sup> As, according to Hodkinson, typical elements of association with the Goth subculture throughout adulthood include attendance at nightclub events and the incorporation of Gothic styles of dress in the club and in their daily lives,<sup>127</sup> continuing participation in the subculture represents a form of strange temporalities for Elder Goths whose lifeways allow for significant amounts of their available time spent attending, or in the case of Goth musicians and DJs, working, at nightclubs and socializing with other adults late into the night. Gothic Studies scholar Isabella van Elferen posits that transgression in Goth is often signaled through music associated with a type of transcendence which leads to the

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<sup>125</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 9-10.

<sup>126</sup> Jodie Taylor, “Queer Temporalities and the Significance of ‘Music Scene’ Participation in the Identities of Middle-aged Queers,” *Sociology* 44 (5): 905.

<sup>127</sup> Hodkinson, “Ageing in a Spectacular ‘Youth Culture’: Continuity, Change and Community amongst Older Goths,” 268.

dissolution of boundaries such as between the worldly and the divine.<sup>128</sup> This transgression and transcendence apparent in Gothic music also breaks down boundaries between youth and adulthood, allowing lifelong Gothic temporalities to form around music and style. The draw of Baltimore's "Blue Collar Goth" was and is more than spectacular style; it is an affinity with Gothic music which provided an entrance into and lifelong membership with the Gothic community.

### *Growing up Goth: Adolescence through Adulthood*

Societal deviance has played a strong role in the subcultural identifications of my informants throughout their life courses. Not all adults who attend Goth nights on a regular basis self-identify as Goth or feel any affinity with the subculture whatsoever.<sup>129</sup> They may identify as a member of another subculture or scene (Neska referred to herself as a "progressive" in high school which she described as a catch all term encompassing punk and Goth), or in the case of Michael, who affiliates more with punk than Goth but refuses to be defined as either, subcultural identification is unnecessary, particularly as one ages: "I never really thought of myself as an anything... at this age, there is no need to be a whatever. You know what? I'm all those things... I've been all those things for so many years, that if anybody thinks I'm not one because I'm the other?"

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<sup>128</sup> Isabella Van Elferen, "Spectral Liturgy: Transgression, Ritual, and Music in Gothic," in *The Gothic in Contemporary Literature and Popular Culture: Pop Goth*, eds. Justin Edwards, Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet (New York: Routledge, 2012), 135.

<sup>129</sup> This type of cognitive dissonance is exemplified by Cuban-American musician Spacey, who joked with me in an interview that the Pillsbury Doughboy is more Goth than he is, despite him having been a part of the 1980s Goth scene in Florida with Marilyn Manson and the Spooky Kids.

Even though they might not always think of themselves as Goths,” all of my informants self-identified as “weirdos” or “freaks” – a disidentification with middle class lifeways which began in childhood. Introduced to underground and Goth music and style as teenagers by older peers and through alternative media, being “weird” became a form of solidarity with others which manifested itself through a shared affinity with music and style. For Neska, who felt isolated as a sensitive child and felt like a misfit in a large sports-loving blended family, finding “strange” underground music as a teenager through MTV and listening to Linda’s show on the Towson University radio station WCVT was the first identification she had felt in her life:

I didn’t have peers, I didn’t have friends, I spent a lot of time with adults... [Finding Goth music] was like I’d found my first friend. Finally realizing that there are people like me in the world. There are people who think the way I think, and feel the way I feel, and these lyrics really resonated with me. And it was just the first time that I was like “Okay, I’m not an alien!”... I really felt so alien [growing up] and music delivered me from that.

Listening to Gothic music created a sense of community and a space for Neska to make sense of her youthful alienation. Neska describes the “intensity and darkness” which attracted her to Gothic music mirroring the intensity and darkness of horror films that her father and brothers took her to on Friday nights: “The more intense it is, the better. It’s not always sad. It’s not always angry. Sometimes very beautiful, but it’s always intense. And that for me was the appeal, you know? Music isn’t fluff and I find that Goth music in particular tends to be not just lyrically intense but very musically intense. There’s so much connection.” Similar to Benedict Anderson’s

“imagined communities” of newspaper readers creating a national conscience,<sup>130</sup> Neska’s disidentification with mainstream society was paired with a sense of affinity with Gothic music and its other listeners – “people like me!”- even before she met other members of the subculture. Andy Bennett refers to the internalized feeling of connection which Neska shares with music as an “affective scene”; a form of knowingness on the part of isolated individual music fans who listen to similar music in private spheres to collectively make sense of what they are hearing “based on shared generational memories and cultural experience of that music.”<sup>131</sup> The structuring of noise into music created the feelings of connection and community which attracted Neska to Goth music and the subculture and led her to become a DJ, which has kept her involved with the subculture throughout adulthood.

As a teenager, Linda’s Gothic community was not imagined or affective. It was rooted in high school friendships. For Linda, introduced to Goth music and style by a high school friend who only wore black and loved the bands Joy Division and New Order, finding Goth became a way to encourage and embrace her “freakiness.” Drawn to Goth because of the combination of dark music and creative, homemade clothing styles, Goth became a defense mechanism for Linda; a way of “putting on armor against the world” from people whom she thought didn’t like her because she was “weird and strange.”

Linda: I was sort of a loner and shy in high school, and I didn’t have a lot of friends, so to have that world open up to me, saying it’s okay to be weird and

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<sup>130</sup> Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 62-63.

<sup>131</sup> Bennett, *Music, Style, and Aging*, 60.

different, and it made me want to be even more different. So I dyed my hair, even though I think it made my mom upset, and I wore a lot of black, and I even remember shaving like a little bit of my hair on the side, but I could pull all the rest of the hair down over it to hide it from my mom.

Leah: What kind of world do you think you were introduced to through [Goth]? What was that world like?

Linda: ... it was a world that said it was okay to look different, and even celebrated looking different than people every day who just wore regular colors, and jeans, and had normal hair. I was artistic, so I think that I was drawn to the fact that there were so many different looks within that, and it was okay. In fact, it was better if you could find some way of tweaking it and making it all on your own, there was a girl in my high school that had a Mohawk. I thought that was so amazing! I mean, I could never do that because my mom was strict, but I did what I could.

Goth's shock value also drew Linda to the subculture as a teenager. Wearing black clothes and heavy black makeup to hang out with other Goth teenagers in suburban malls, diners, and fast food parking lots served dual functions of subcultural solidarity and shocking adults; she and her friends would wear "anything that would make the old people look at you and be like [theatrical gasp] 'OH MY GOODNESS! WEIRD KIDS!'" We wanted people to be afraid of us. We wanted people at arms' length." Similar to Hebdige's descriptions of punk as a semantic disturbance which violated conventional codes and meanings, performances of Gothic spectacular style disrupted the social order and functioned as demarcations to separate Goths from their societal elders and their normative high school peers.

For Michael, even at a young age, "it seemed normal to be weird." Having grown up in the neighboring farm town of Hereford, where "you got beat up for looking different," Michael, a teenage punk, found more likeminded souls after he transferred to suburban Dulaney High School. Influenced by his best friends, a pair of



sisters who were his neighbors and turned from punk rockers to Goths, Michael became interested in Goth in high school in the late 1980s. Exposed to rock and heavy metal music as a child, he describes his early adolescent self as jaded and “tired of rock” until he discovered the Sex Pistols tape at 12, immediately “fell in love” with punk rock, and started his first punk band; he has played in punk and Goth bands on and off in the Baltimore area for over twenty-five years. Michael initially found the more pulled-together aesthetic of Goth more appealing than the sound, which led him to incorporate elements of Goth style into his punk uniform of homemade band shirts and clothes and boots from the military supply stores:

Goth was as weird as punk, but it was a bit more attractive... more extreme in some ways and less extreme in others... [in Goth] there was a whole different school where the men dressed better, and the women dressed better. Everybody cleans up a little better, but it's still extreme and weird, it's not like going to your rich uncle's dinner party. It's still out there. So I would say it was just neat to look at. And I liked a lot of the music, but it was not like I stopped liking punk. I was a punk kid that liked some of the Goth stuff... and I'd say late teens, early 20s when I started identifying more heavily with the latter.

Michael's early independence from his nuclear family combined with his newfound purchasing power as a working adult in the technology industry spurred his transition from punk to Goth. His relationship with Goth intensified as when he purchased his first Sisters of Mercy cassette tape at age 18 and “dived headlong” into Gothic music, describing the Goth club Orpheus as his new home; perhaps as a form of replacement for the family home he left behind as a teenager.

Linda, Neska, and Michael were drawn together as friends in adolescence by the same forces which draw them to Goth – the feeling that they were innately

different from others: a form of shared darkness through experiences of social alienation “caused by one’s intellectual, artistic, or sexual traits”<sup>132</sup> which ultimately led to disidentifying with mainstream youth culture. Their artistic and musical sensibilities were informed by the combination of music and style in the 1980s Goth culture, an association which has continued into adulthood. Neska and Michael were spurred to become involved in the local Goth music scene, and Linda, a budding artist, was attracted to Goth as an art form. Their Gothic temporalities began to shape in youth through disidentification with the mainstream coupled with their affinity with the darkness of Goth culture.

### Imagining Adulthood

What my informants didn’t want for their adulthoods – the trappings of middle class societal expectations – mattered just as much as what they envisioned for their adult lives. Although adulthood is a cultural construct, striking out on one’s own for the first time is an economic reality which began early for Neska, Linda, and Michael, who all moved out of the family home as teenagers. Goodlad and Bibby’s assertion that the tendency of Goths to develop interests in literature, philosophy, and art sometimes leads working-class Goths to obtain university degrees in the humanities<sup>133</sup> does not hold true for them, as they prioritized entering the workforce and participation in nightclub events over completing their degrees.

While growing up Goth, Linda and Neska both emphasized the immediate and the here and now. Neither imagined the future. Linda, an art major, left local Towson

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<sup>132</sup> Gunn, 45.

<sup>133</sup> Goodlad and Bibby, 13-14.

University after achieving her ambition of being a DJ on the free form campus radio station WCVT. When viewed over the life course imaginary, Linda was much more certain about what she didn't want in her future – children and a house: “I was living in the moment so much in my 20s... [I thought] college will always be there for me. I want to club every night. This is what I want to do right now. And I didn't think about the future... I didn't want what everybody was raised and taught to want: to get married, have kids, buy a house, have a steady job, 9-5, punch the clock, sit at a desk.” Her experience with underground music through her position at the station served as a form of self-education and a way for her to connect with other Goth clubgoers and music lovers, including Neska, who spent her teenage years listening to Linda's college radio show, and eventually met Linda in person at a local nightclub.

Neska, who moved out of the family home and into an apartment on the day of her high school graduation to “start over,” cheerfully views her adult life as a form of improvisation where she has been “winging it” the whole time.

I don't think I ever really had a picture... It's just like that old saying, when you're a kid, you always think adults know exactly what they're doing and everything is on purpose and you have all the answers, and then you get to adulthood and you're like “I don't know what the [expletive] I'm doing!” I've kind of embraced that! I just kinda go with it!

For Neska, “starting over” at eighteen years old meant financial and personal independence for the first time in her life after having to fend for herself in a family home where her sensitive and artistic nature made her feel like an outcast. Rather than envisioning a traditional career or a nuclear family as a life goal, Neska knew from a young age that she did not want children. Instead, she channels her emotional energy

into her friendships, describing herself as a “scene mom” who takes care of her friends and helps them out, but ultimately wants to go home and have her own space. Similar to Carrie Brownstein, the lead actor of *Portlandia*, Neska is single and childless by choice, a life path outside of the norm for middle-aged women: “The biggest sacrifice [I’ve made for my lifestyle] is a personal relationship. But I feel like it’s more than balanced out by the tremendous friends... It’s not about having a better life, it’s about having the right life for you. And I am fairly content with my life... I have a very strong support network that I can talk to, that I can rely on. And I like it [where I am in life]. And so I’m kind of content to stay here.” The friendships she’s made throughout her years participating in the Goth subculture have become her support system and her chosen family.

Both Linda and Neska’s desire to live in the moment and on their own terms bucks the normative conception of adulthood which Halberstam writes has been “unquestioningly associated with reproduction and the family.”<sup>134</sup> From this viewpoint, youth and maturity have been constructed as a binary from which one deviates if they choose lifeways revolving around priorities other than childrearing. As neither Linda nor Neska wanted children, their lifeways have always been centered around temporalities which accommodate going out to clubs in the evenings and the embrace of their chosen families. Linda, who has been with her husband Armin since the late 1990s, describes the idea of having children as a punishment which would prevent her from her preferred leisure activities: meeting friends at local bars and clubs to socialize multiple times per week, dining out, and spending quiet

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<sup>134</sup> Halberstam, 176.

days enjoying the “peaceful and beautiful” atmosphere of historic cemeteries in the area.

For a parent, the act of going out late at night to socialize on a regular basis is a transgressive gesture; society expects if not demands that parents will stay home with their children after dark. But Gothic temporalities do not have to exclude parenthood. Michael always imagined his life course within the framework of a reproductive temporality; the end game that he pictured from when he was young was a monogamous marriage, homeownership, and fatherhood. But he also imagined what he didn’t want his life to look like at 40 – namely, a series of status symbols. Is this because he’s a guy?

It’s a weird life. And I don’t know if I’m giving myself too much credit. But my life seems pretty weird to me. It’s a collection of rather unlikely things that are combined. And I don’t mean weird bad. I think my life’s really neat. I’m really happy to be part of it. I always kind of figured that I would not wind up, even as a teenager, I kind of figured that I wouldn’t wind up wearing a pair of tan khakis and an alligator shirt living in a gated community. That seemed kind of nightmarish to me. That to me seems like the ultimate sellout, that I just one day grew up. And I don’t mean matured, I mean grew up the way they always defined. That to me seemed nightmarish. To find myself at 40, with a wife who just finished her first round of nip and tuck or breast enlargement, getting into our Lexus in Topfield... I really like long-term relationships and stability and what I view as normalcy. But I didn’t want to wind up driving a [expletive] Lexus. There’s a certain [attitude]... I don’t even need to explain it. You know exactly what I’m talking about. The LAX jacket, the Boys Latin or Dulaney LAX jacket, the Lexus SUV.

Fatherhood is not an impediment to subcultural participation because of the understanding he has with his wife, Alison, a professional sculptor who is also a part of the Goth and punk scene, who appreciates his need to go out to clubs and Goth

nights and hear live music. They have structured their life to allow each spouse to take turns childrearing while the other spends time with friends or enjoys their passion.

It's actually surprisingly easy. I mean, it's easier for me being the husband, because I am not tied down to a nursing baby. So when I went out on Friday night to the Depot, I just went out. Friday is my night. Like, we take turns getting the other person whole night... So [being a father] has impacted [my participation] in the Goth scene, but it hasn't ruined it. And I really think a whole lot of that is marrying within your scene to a degree.

### *The Reality of Adulthood: Goth Within the Workplace*

Growing up Goth does not mean leaving the trappings of Goth behind when moving into adulthood. Through three case studies, I examine how adults express their personal aesthetic and experience Gothic adulthood inside in everyday life. In doing this, I find that Goth in Baltimore has become a lifespan project instead of a distinct style collectively adapted to suit the needs and desires of aging Goths.

#### Linda: Gothic Entrepreneurship at "In the Details"

As Goths claim subcultural capital and status through ownership of consumer goods, particularly clothing, which differentiate Goths subtly from one another as well as mainstream culture,<sup>135</sup> entrepreneurship has been a part of the Goth subculture since the 1980s. Christina M. Goulding and Michael Saren write that the Goth subculture has become a system of consumption which has moved from individual displays of subcultural style towards a two-tiered system of production and

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<sup>135</sup> Hodkinson, *Goth*, 132.

consumption,<sup>136</sup> and Goth entrepreneur Linda views owning her clothing boutique, “In the Details,” as one of her major life achievements. After spending most of her adult life working in clothing and accessory boutiques, she opened “In the Details” in Hampden on May 10, 2011. Located on the ground floor of a historic rowhouse on the Avenue, Hampden’s main shopping drag, “In the Details” carries new, secondhand, and vintage men’s and women’s clothing and accessories. My conversations and interviews with Linda unfolded during quiet weekday afternoons on the shop floor, occasionally interrupted by customers browsing the store, Linda’s friends stopping by with a bottle of white wine to share, or the postman bringing deliveries of clothing and the endless bills associated with sole proprietorship. While we talked, I often watched the storefront and greeted customers while Linda did errands or laundry in the building’s basement to gain a perspective on the daily workings of a small boutique.

Owning her own shop allows Linda to create and display her personal aesthetic outside of the club in two ways: in what she wears to work at the shop, and what clothes and accessories she carries as merchandise. Self-employment allows her to have the freedom to wear her chosen clothing styles without being constrained by employer imposed dress codes. Both “In the Details” and Linda’s personal style were inspired by a former boss, boutique owner Elsie, who Linda worked for in the 1990s, and views as a role model for staying freaky and fashionable with “amazing style” as one moves through middle age: “She’s the epitome of all that. And she definitely was

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<sup>136</sup> Christina Goulding and Michael Saren. “‘Gothic’ Entrepreneurs: A Study of the Subcultural Commodification Process,” in *Consumer Tribes*, edited by Bernard Cova, Robert V. Kozinets, and Avi Shankar (London: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2007), 236.

a role model to me and I now know that as a woman, I can still stay true to my style even no matter what age I am. And I will do that. Because it's important to me."

"Staying true" to her style in her 40s means mixing Gothic elements with the more colorful clothing that she is attracted to as an adult. Although she has loved wearing black from a very young age, her current style reflects her attraction to many different styles, and she picks her daily work outfits based on her mood that morning. Linda's typical wear at the shop combines typical Goth elements such as dark colored fabrics, lace, velour, and black boots and heels with brightly colored and patterned jackets and leggings. Over the course of two years, her hair changed from its natural dark brown to a bright shade of orange and various pink and magenta hues which collect stares when she is outside of Hampden. But despite her eye-catching pink hair, the shock value of spectacular style is not as important to Linda as it was in her teens and twenties: "I'd actually rather not shock people too much now because I don't have the same need that I did to do that, and I already feel weird and separate enough from the world because of things that I like and the way that I feel... sometimes I'd rather blend in occasionally so I don't stand out because I don't want the attention [all the time any more]."

But spectacular, shocking style still has a place in Linda's life. Her club wear at Elecktroshock and the Depot continues to directly reflect Gothic sensibilities: black lace, short skirts, heels, and black makeup, and her favorite holiday, Halloween, provides her with opportunity to display the most spectacular of styles, such as dressing in drag. After we handed out candy to hundreds of revelers who passed by on the Avenue on Halloween night, Linda fashioned an outfit that was very much



Baltimore: Elton John crossed with John Waters, and we headed to a costume contest at “Kiss and Make-Up,” a makeup and souvenir boutique next door to “In the Details” which caters to a campy, gay male clientele, with a framed portrait of Divine prominently displayed on one of the bright pink walls.<sup>137</sup> Linda’s “Elton John Waters” look combined elements of her everyday wardrobe (red pants, boots, a black and white shirt, and a fuzzy blue winter coat from the 1990s manufactured by a Gothic clothing company) paired with a rainbow feather boa, slicked back pink hair, oversized circular sunglasses reminiscent of Elton John’s onstage look, and a drawn on moustache similar to Waters, creating a masculinized drag king appearance which overwhelms her five foot tall frame. Rather than using Halloween as a more societally sanctioned way of performing Goth, her transgression occurs through dressing as a combination of gay icons.

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<sup>137</sup> The contest was a “mashup” party where people combined costumes. Other entries included “Debbie Harry Potter” (a woman wearing a blonde wig reminiscent of Blondie singer Debbie Harry and Harry Potter themed clothing), and “Charles Carol Burnett” (a man dressed in colonial menswear as a combination of Maryland founder Charles Carroll with a curtain on a curtain rod across his back akin to Carol Burnett’s famous skit spoofing the film *Gone With the Wind*). Neither entry, or Linda, won the contest.



**Figure 1. Linda in costume as “Elton John Waters.”**  
Photo taken by the author at “In the Details” on October 31, 2015.



**Figure 2. Linda’s typical workday outfit pairing traditional Gothic elements – a black velvet dress and black heels – with blue patterned stockings.**  
Photo taken by the author at “In the Details” on March 11, 2016.

In addition to displaying her personal style, owning “In the Details” allows Linda to pass on her personal aesthetic to customers through the clothes she stocks and the music that she plays while she works. Her current, more colorful styles are reflected in the clothes for sale at “In the Details.” Although Linda will occasionally set up a little rack of Goth themed clothing, which she as describes as “black slips, black lace see through shirts, anything that’s dark or weird,” and occasionally stocks Goth jewelry made by local crafters, the majority of clothes at she stocks are colorful and full of patterns, echoing both how her personal sensibilities have broadened as

she has grown older and how Goth and punk themed boutiques have become a dying breed. Echoing Hebdige's observations that subcultural styles will eventually be adopted and commodified by the mainstream,<sup>138</sup> Linda believes that Gothic shops have closed because of the combination of mainstream mall store Hot Topic, the availability of merchandise on the Internet, and mainstream, faddish, adoptions of Goth: "You can't make money [with only a brick and mortar Goth store] that way. Not in today's world... I used to subscribe to Elle magazine, and suddenly Goth was trendy. Which made me both happy and sad at the same time because I said 'well finally now I'm seeing represented in fashion what I love. But it's just a fad... it will come and go.'"

Linda also passes her aesthetic onto customers through her musical choices, as she has satellite radio playing during the entire workday, choosing a mix of music which reflects her mood. For the majority of people who are not musicians, the relationship between music and daily activities is that of a soundtrack which accompanies daily routines.<sup>139</sup> But Bennett writes that for some aging music fans who work alone, as Linda does, listening to music in the workplace has become a means of reflection and re-evaluation.<sup>140</sup> As an adult, listening to the music that first attracted her to the subculture expresses a wealth of feelings: "It's allowing me to sort of blow off steam that I have from frustrations in my life... It's like I become one with [older Goth] music, and I feel like it's helping me, it's exercising me. And old

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<sup>138</sup> Hebdige, 92-99.

<sup>139</sup> Michael Bull and Tia DeNora, paraphrased in Bennett, *Music, Style, and Aging*, 96.

<sup>140</sup> Bennett, *Music, Style, and Aging*, 97.

school Goth – part of it is nostalgia... I still rock out to things like the Cure and Joy Division and the Smiths... it's what I like to hear.”

Linda's Gothic temporality is shaped around a combination of elements of Gothic style which she shares with others through boutique ownership, her relationship with music throughout adulthood, her leisure activities, and life choices which have allowed her to remain a regular clubgoer. Her favorite places to visit – nightclubs and cemeteries – celebrate the darkness which she describes as “the more melancholy side of life.” As the desire to shock others with her appearance has waned as she has moved into middle age, Linda's relationship with Goth has become a more personalized aesthetic similar to what punk and straight edge have become for middle-aged adults. Bennett writes that the need for older punks to tone down their image for workplace reasons is countered by an internalized ideological discourse; punk has become “a part” of a person, and Davis argues that older punks identify the meaning of punk in terms of how it functions in their lives: “to connect with other people, to express emotion, to explore their creativity.”<sup>141</sup> Being self-employed, Linda has little concrete need to tone down her image to fit into the outside world, yet she has done so, and Goth remains an integral part of her personality. Elements of her Gothic identity are still outwardly displayed in the store and in her personal style, but she now views Goth as a macabre aesthetic and a deep affinity with Gothic music which is publicly performed through nightclub attendance. Rather than a phase left behind in youth or a Halloween costume to be taken on and off at will, Goth is something that “fits” who she is in life: “Goth is... I guess it's what fits me the most

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<sup>141</sup> Bennett, “Punk's Not Dead,” 233; Davis, 118.

inside... it kinda makes me happy. It fits the person who I am. I definitely feel like an outsider in life, and it helps me to feel connected to other people that are similar to me. It's the soundtrack of my life."

Owning "In the Details" has allowed Linda and her husband Armin, a sommelier in training, to "live the dream" of her idea of a bohemian life. For Linda, whose parents divorced as a teenager, "living the dream" is a rejection of the middle class values which she grew up surrounded by. Despite the lack of spending money which constrains their leisure activities, she describes self-employment as a form of freedom. Both Linda and Armin work multiple jobs and have traded financial stability for independence from corporate America. Detached from reproductive temporalities, they can live and socialize at night as they choose.

#### Michael: Gothic Counterculture at St. Stephen's Anglican Church

I first met Michael in May 2013 at the Windup Space, a non-Goth club in the Station North neighborhood, when the Goth/Industrial band he was in at the time, The Drowning Season, played at a CD release party. His black garments and clerical collar immediately caught my eye, and I found myself curious – What religion is he a part of? How does someone balance the morbid components of Goth with a calling to a religious vocation? Christian Goths view themselves as a minority within the subculture<sup>142</sup> – had he experienced any intersubcultural prejudice or discrimination for his beliefs? I sent him a Facebook friend request after the show and watched his

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<sup>142</sup> Anna Powell, "God's Own Medicine: Religion and Parareligion in U.K. Goth Culture," *Goth: Undead Subculture*, edited by Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 366. Interestingly, none of the Goths in Powell's study identified as a member of a mainstream branch of Christianity or Roman Catholicism; they were from charismatic sects which generally de-emphasize the ritual elements of religious practice.

life as an Anglican priest, a multi-instrumentalist and singer attempting to start a new Gothic rock band, the Chief Financial Officer of two small IT startups, and a father of four unfold over social media. After running into him at the Depot and chatting about music on a few occasions, I initiated a Facebook conversation and asked if he'd be interested in talking about his experiences in the Goth scene for this project. He immediately agreed to participate and invited me to visit that Sunday's service at St. Stephen's Anglican Church, a small parish situated next to a golf course in a quiet, upper middle class area of the neighboring suburb of Timonium.

Arriving early to the service, I found myself one of perhaps five churchgoers during the 11 AM service, and the only one who was under the age of 65. I curiously looked over the week's bulletin, having never been in an Anglican church before, and was tickled to find that that week's Communion Service and Book of Common Prayer were services which originated in 1662, leading my mind to wander around about Henry VIII and Thomas Cranmer before Michael and his two fellow priests entered the sanctuary. I immediately wondered why such a classical type of service would appeal to a father of four who spends his free time at Goth nights and openly describes himself as a bit of a contrarian. The Anglican service was very similar to contemporary Catholic services, incorporating rituals of kneeling for prayer, elevating the Bible at certain points during the service, and hymns sung in archaic verse. Perhaps Michael was drawn to the ritualistic elements of the Anglican service which bear similarities to ritual performances of Goth: the religious iconography, candles and incantations, wearing Gothic-inspired clothing in certain spaces to evoke a shared camaraderie – as Richard Schechner writes, performance is “behavior heightened, if

ever so slightly, and publicly displayed.”<sup>143</sup> Perhaps, like David Hart, the self-described “Godfather of Christian Goth,”<sup>144</sup> his embrace of darkness has become a way to evangelize to Gothic youth. Or perhaps he simply grew up Anglican, and becoming a priest is a way of identifying with one of his cultural traditions.

Michael’s sermon that morning directly addressed the seeming paradox of his membership in the Goth subculture: “People ask why an old Punk and Goth guy like me became a priest. The answer is simple: Because Jesus is the most countercultural figure who ever lived.” When I formally interviewed Michael at a local coffee shop the next month, learning more about this paradox was at the top of my list. Michael’s shifting relationship with religion is intertwined with his conception of his subcultural identities. At first, his dissatisfaction with Catholicism as a teenager directly led to his teenage nihilism and dabbling with Satanism: “Being a punk rocker, or Goth, or whatever, kind of goes hand-in-hand with being a disaffected Roman Catholic.” But being a punk and Goth did not prevent him from returning to the religious fold as a young adult and seeking a denomination which fit his occupational schedule; at the time he worked as a bouncer at the Ottobar, a rock club in Baltimore. After rejecting a large, nondenominational megachurch because of its impersonality, Michael was introduced to St. Stephen’s by his now-wife, Alison, and immediately felt a kinship with the “high church” style of worship reminiscent of the Catholic traditions of his childhood.

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<sup>143</sup> Schechner, 1.

<sup>144</sup> David Hart, “Christiangoth.com Presents Pastor David Hart,” *Sanctuary*, Feb. 26, 2006, <http://www.christiangoth.com/pastordavidhart.htm>.



**Figure 3. The small sanctuary at St. Stephen's Anglican Church. The high pitched roof creates an atmosphere similar to an ancient Northern European building. Ritual elements of religious practices are visible throughout the sanctuary. The altar is in the center, and the raised lectern where Michael preaches is on the left. Photo taken by the author on November 1, 2015 after the conclusion of the 1662 Communion Service.**

Michael's choice of denomination is part of what makes his vocation as a priest and his participation in subcultural activities less contradictory. My first inkling that the Anglican Church in America may not be as staid as its rituals suggest occurred during the Eucharist service. As I was obviously the newcomer to the service, one of the priests made sure to publicly note that all who were baptized were able to partake in the Eucharist, which despite some unfounded trepidation because of my mainline Protestant background, I did. Walking back to my pew from the front of the church, I heard a few familiar chords gently drift from the organ and quickly



flipped through the hymnal to find out which ancient hymn shared chords with the hit Tears for Fears song “Mad World,” which was released in 1982. Michael’s head was bent during the song, seemingly in prayer, which he revealed to me in an hour long conversation after the service was a gesture to conceal hysterical laughter, as the British organist is a Tears for Fears fan and occasionally sneaks in unexpected homages to the group during the service.

The Anglican Church has also accepted his sartorial style: silver earrings, full sleeve tattoos, and entirely black wardrobe, an image which has not changed radically since he was a teenage punk. As part of Anglican best practices, he wears his clerical collar at all times to express that his calling to the priesthood is a never ending vocation, which he feels is necessary in a middle class area which would not expect a punk rocker to be a priest: “If you’ve got to give somebody last rites [after a car accident], they don’t want somebody in an Exploited t-shirt, you know? But that’s unique to me as far as priests go. They want some guy in a golf shirt.” Rather than a measure of societal conformity, the only major change to his appearance since his youth is a reaction to a visible sign of aging - his hairstyle, which went from long and dyed black to a fully shaved head “when it started falling out.” He embraced his new hairless appearance, joking that it was reminiscent of when he shaved his head as a teenage punk, instead of trying to conceal hair loss with a different style.



**Figure 4. The photo of Michael which accompanies sermon podcasts on St. Stephen's website. Rather than choosing a cheerful photo of Michael wearing his white clerical garments or standing inside the sanctuary, St. Stephen's uses a solemn and almost angry closely cropped image, signifying their acceptance of his subcultural appearance and willingness to promote this image to the public.**

One key to understanding Michael's relationship with Goth and religion is his image of Jesus as a contrarian figure, which appeals to his subcultural identifications, combined with the individualism inherent in his interpretations of punk and Goth.

According to Michael, Christian Goths are outnumbered by atheist and agnostic Goths, who have often been confrontational with him regarding his spiritual beliefs, which he finds hypocritical.

There are punks and Goths who are so dogmatic about what they think the canon of belief is to be a punk or a Goth that they think you can't be one of those things and be a Christian or theist of any stripe. But for me, the opposite was true, because I thought you embraced this counterculture, which holds as absolutely necessary this thing of free thought, free will, doing your own thing, right? So [being punk and Goth] has got to be doing your own thing, even if doing your own thing winds up being something which is otherwise unacceptable [in the subculture]... I really didn't like having this idea that I had to be an atheist to dictate if I was [punk or Goth] or not just because I wanted to be a punk. So I started exploring religion, and I found that I believed it to be real. And I thought that if you think this is real, if you think God is real, if you think Jesus is God, is the son of God, however you want to phrase that depending on which catechism you use. Because both are true. Then you can't pretend to not be that so that you can fit in. Because that's just being a different kind of poser.

Michael's interpretation of subcultural ideologies as calls to individualism rather than belonging as defined by a set of subcultural boundaries partially eases the tension between his participation in punk and Goth subcultural activities and his calling to the priesthood. But a major contradiction remains. Growing up, Michael never wanted the middle class ideal of the Lexus and the mansion in the suburbs, but he still aspired to marriage and a home – goals which he achieved in his early thirties. The Gothic temporality which Michael has created for his life – a mixture of religion, parenthood, subcultural participation, desire for non-normativity, and dark, angry music – can be viewed as a part of “complex personhood,” introduced by Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Gordon's thesis in *Ghostly Matters* is simple: “life is complicated.”<sup>145</sup> “Complex personhood” is a way of acknowledging these complications and contradictions. Rather than following a single ideology or belief system, like Christianity, Punk, or Goth, Gordon argues that people are shaped by multiple histories which interact with multiple identities. “Complex personhood” means acknowledging that these contradictions are part of a person's existence and life path rather than a series of distinct and conflicting identity categories. As Gordon writes, “all people remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others ... complex personhood means conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that

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<sup>145</sup> Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3.

life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning."<sup>146</sup>

The narrative that Michael tells about his life as an adult is entangled with multiple imaginations and histories – how he viewed his past as a child, how he views it now – and cultural tales which are informed by his personal experiences as a priest, a punk, and a Goth, as well as larger societal narratives such as the expectations of middle class life. What Michael considers “normalcy” is the seemingly contradictory combination of punk, Goth, fatherhood, and religion. From Gordon's perspective, these contradictions are a part of life. And sometimes life just is. The contradictions that seem so apparent to an outside observer cause little issues at all for the person living those experiences.

For Michael, there appears to be little tension; he enjoys his contradiction-filled life and seems happy to be living the way he is, with a Gothic temporality shaped around a marriage and family life which has been adapted to allow for attendance at live shows and nightclub events. Michael performs Gothic darkness primarily through music; as a songwriter and multi-instrumentalist in multiple Gothic rock bands over the past twenty five years,<sup>147</sup> he experiences and expresses Goth as a stage performer, wearing entirely black clothes and surrounded by other Goths in dimly lit nightclubs, spaces which Anna Powell refers to as “sacred or parareligious,”

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>147</sup> The most recent band that Michael was a part of, The Drowning Season, was invited to play Whitby Gothic Weekend, the world's largest Goth festival in Whitby, England, and the primary site of multiple studies on the Goth subculture, including Hodkinson's studies of Goths in the 1990s and 2000s, and consumer culture researchers Goulding and Saren's studies of Goth entrepreneurs and the role of the vampire within Goth androgyny.

resembling conventionally religious practices through the consumption of alcohol, the production of intense emotional and spiritual experiences, and the special ambiance created by the prevalence of the sacred symbols of religion.<sup>148</sup> Michael's embrace of Christianity as an adult and his choice of vocation parallel the dark, sacred spaces in Goth culture.

### Neska: DJing as Embodied Experience

My first realization that something was unique about the Baltimore Goth scene occurred during one of my first visits to the Depot. While I was observing the dance floor, the music suddenly went silent. No one in the room batted an eyelash; they were too absorbed in talking with each other to notice, and no one was dancing. Neska, who had been sitting at the opposite end of the club talking with other attendees, yelled "I'm coming!" and ran the length of the club to fix the technical error before returning to the bar to chat. What were they talking about? Why was this conversation so important to her that she would leave her job? And this was happening in a nightclub – so why wasn't anyone dancing?

I had heard of "DJ Neska" from nightclub flyers and Facebook promotional materials, but when Linda introduced me to her at the Depot in 2014, I was surprised to see that Neska was the tall woman with short grey hair that I had seen on the dancefloor at every Elektroschock and Batz. I had no idea that she was one of the DJs – or, revealing my assumptions about DJs - that DJ Neska was a woman! My formal interview with Neska in January 2016 at her favorite Indian restaurant in the Charles Village neighborhood was the first time that I spoke with her for more than a few

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<sup>148</sup> Powell, 359-361.

minutes. I had never seen her outside of either a nightclub or a live show. Wearing an oversized black t-shirt and jeans, she immediately stood up from the table to greet me with a hug and a huge smile.

After a few minutes of conversation, it immediately became clear that Neska's relationship with Goth is intertwined with her relationship to music. She was exceptionally warm, welcoming, and hilarious – quite the opposite in both appearance and manner of many of the subdued, gloomy images of Goths. Although she appreciates the dark aspects of Goth, which she was drawn to as a child, the elaborate aspects of Gothic dress are not, and have never been, important to her. Instead, the constant in Neska's life course has been the emotional power, dark sounds, and intensity of Gothic music which allows her to express her feelings and share them with others through her career as a professional DJ which she began as a teenager. As with Michael and Linda, Neska works multiple jobs, and as we discussed her life on and off of the dance floor, it became clear that she experiences Goth in the workplace in both of her jobs, as an employee of the Baltimore City Health Department Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, and a DJ at Goth clubs, as forms of embodiment through connection with others.

As a temporary administrative worker with WIC, Neska mans the front desk at multiple WIC offices, and enjoys having the opportunity to connect with customers and be friendly and helpful to families who are expecting an impersonal “social services robot.” Her connection with Goth is toned down in the work environment; she changes from her everyday wear, which has been the same since she was a teenage Goth – “I’m a jeans and t-shirt kinda gal” – to cheerful, kid-friendly scrubs

featuring cartoon characters and Halloween themes. Civil service was an unexpected career path. Having held a number of jobs since she was a teenager from convenience store clerking to medical office management, Neska found a position with WIC in 2014 through a temp agency after having lost a job in corporate finance, and seeks a permanent position, as her current temp position does not pay a living wage.

Neska's true calling as a DJ offers a different and perhaps less tangible type of connection and embodiment. Through her intentions, movements, and actions at the club, she creates a transfer of feeling and subcultural knowledge between herself and the club attendees on the dance floor. Diana Taylor differentiates between two types of transfer of knowledge: archival knowledge (the written record), which is constructed as fixed by writers and archivists, while the repertoire (the body of knowledge transmitted through performance), is nonarchival.<sup>149</sup> Rather than a set of binary oppositions, the archive and the repertoire work in tandem alongside other systems of transmission.<sup>150</sup> Halberstam argues that the idea of a queer subcultural archive should become a floating signifier for "the kinds of lives implied by the paper remnants of [rock and punk] shows, clubs, events, and meetings... zines, posters, and other temporary artifacts,"<sup>151</sup> underscoring both the liminality of punk shows and nightclub events and their importance in constructing a collective subcultural memory. At *Elektroschock*, an event at gay and lesbian club with many gay and transgender attendees, the archive is the handwritten setlist of the songs which Neska

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<sup>149</sup> Diana Taylor, vxii.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>151</sup> Halberstam, 169.

plays each night in her residency. Each setlist is a living document which is changed and altered throughout the night as clubgoers handwrite requests for songs. After the event ends, the setlist is scanned and placed on the Elecktroshock Facebook page, turning the document into archival material in a self-mediated electronic archive.<sup>152</sup> The knowledge of the songs that were played at the event becomes the written record of a multitude of identities expressed on the dance floor that night: Gothic, middle-aged, subcultural, urban, queer.

Neska's physical experiences at the club are the repertoire – a form of knowledge transmission which enacts embodied memory through “performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge.”<sup>153</sup> As opposed to the so-called “more stable” archive, the repertoire requires presence; people participate in the production and transmission of knowledge simply by “being there.”<sup>154</sup> Beginning from her first DJ gig as a teenager at a New Year's Eve party, Neska describes the feeling evoked by DJing as one of connection between herself and the audience through music; an embodied knowledge that is transmitted on the dance floor:

I was like “I made you feel what I feel! Now try this!” And I still get that high every single time that I do a gig. I feel it! It's like “I'm a gonna get you! I'm a gonna get you!” and I feel like I didn't do my job right if I don't get at least one “Woo!!” or “Are you trying to kill me!” [*Laughs*]

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<sup>152</sup> See Appendix for a scan of the setlist.

<sup>153</sup> Diana Taylor, 20.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.



Instead of notoriety or monetary rewards, Neska measures her success as a DJ through tangible audience reactions expressed through their bodies while on the dance floor. Passing her feelings, experience, and knowledge to clubgoers becomes the form of transfer. Embodiment also includes the tactile experiences of working as a DJ. Refusing to use contemporary equipment such as MP3 players or computers, Neska takes flipbooks and crates of CDs to each show because she enjoys the physicality of the DJ experience and passing that physical experience onto others:

And for me, that's kind of a thrill. Flipping through, they're all alphabetized, I can look for the song I want, and get it get it get it! *[mimics flipping motion]* ... That's really my process. I don't really care what other people do. I think if you're moving the dance floor, you're doing your job... Turning knobs and bleeps and bloops don't mean anything if you've got an empty dance floor in a bar full of pissed off people.

Just as the archive and the repertoire are not a hierarchy or a set of oppositions, Neska's experiences in the DJ booth, on the dance floor, and the written setlist cannot be fully separated. They are ways of understanding, ways of knowing, what happened during the same nightclub event. During Neska's sets, I observed her talking with her friends at the bar, twirling around the dance floor solo, and running to the bar from the DJ booth to get a drink and chat with friends and bartenders: all forms of communication, both with her friends at the club, and with Gothic music, which have continually framed her participation in Goth since she was a teenager. She describes these communicatory experiences as a form of "freak-dar" where she can locate other non-normative adults in nearby areas whom she has never met as her adopted kin: "I can tell a weirdo from across the room, and it doesn't matter what you're wearing, I can spot you! And be like yeah – you're one of me! It's that sort of recognizing

something of myself in them, and something of them in me. [Goth] is a tremendous sense of community for me. That's how I view it."

Neska's Gothic temporality, a mixture of music, friendships, and embodied experiences in the DJ booth and on the dance floor, creates a balance in her life which has allowed her to navigate through adulthood. Through the darkness of Goth (both music and her lifelong love of horror films), she was able to find her calling as a DJ and her community; rejecting long-term romantic relationships and parenthood in favor of her DJ career and her chosen family of fellow Goths. Through the darkness of Goth, she describes herself as having found happiness and contentment.

Leah: It's interesting that you talk about both the darkness of Goth appealing to you, but also that you have described yourself as "living in the light."

Neska: I think they balance each other completely, and I think they're both necessary and order to be a whole person and to live a life. As cliché as it is, it's true. You can't have one without the other. If there was no darkness, we would appreciate the light. The light would eventually become annoying. How would you sleep? *[Laughs]*



**Figure 5. Linda (left) and Neska (right) in an embrace on the dance floor at Elektroschock.** Neska is dressed in the Halloween themed scrubs that she wears to her job at WIC. Photo taken by the author at Grand Central nightclub on December 5, 2015.

### Age Awareness and Envisioning the Future

As we are aged by culture, our awareness that we are aging – and thus declining, or becoming societal outcasts for having aged inappropriately – begins at a young age. Ageist practices discriminate against adults who do not fit the desired youthful demographic and appearance. But Linda, Michael, and Neska never

described themselves as “old” or “aging” in relationship to dominant society or the subculture – only “weird” or “alien” – suggesting that living outside of the mainstream presents an alternative to age awareness. They are most aware of their age when viewing their shift to Elder status within the subculture. Rather than becoming subcultural outcasts, their knowledge of Goth becomes an asset that they can transfer onto younger members of the subculture. The shift to Elder status was marked by a shift in their subcultural role, not turning 35 or 40. Michael was made aware of his age when clubgoers began looking up to him for having seen formative punk and Goth bands live: “It’s not so much cultural shifts as it is finding out how old some people are... it’s finding out that someone is 21 at a club and what their touchstones are. What their milestones in life are. It’s not depressing. It doesn’t make me feel maudlin or old. But it does make me aware of how much older I am than some of these people that are in the scene. But I’m still just excited they’re getting into it.”

Serving as a mentor for younger DJs, Neska’s transfer of knowledge to a younger generation is a literal process, as she is aware that her reliance on CDs and outdated technology may eventually force her into retirement. She accepts her limitations but leaves open the door for change.

I know eventually I’ll probably have to retire... I don’t see it happening anytime soon. I am not happy when I am not DJing. It is really my primary creative outlet. To that effect, I’ve also taken some of the younger DJs under my wing a bit, giving people opportunities, guest spots, sort of taught them my tips and tricks and the little things that were shared with me when I was coming up as a DJ. Sort of moving that onto the next generation because even when I do retire I’m still going to want to go out, I’m not going to die! I mean eventually, were all going to die, but you know what I mean! *[Laughs]* I think

it will come down to gear that's going to force me into retirement, because... I'm not a tech savvy person.

Having fashioned individual Gothic temporalities, Linda, Michael, and Neska envision their life courses to hold more of the same, implying contentment with their life choices. Linda would like to keep "In the Details" open for as many years as possible and visit London, the birth of punk and Goth subcultures. Neska just wants to "keep doing what she's doing" as a DJ and living life in the moment. Michael envisions his future as a mix of reproductive temporalities – child-rearing – and the desire for advancement in his career in the ministry to where he can retire from IT work and become a full time member of the clergy. Their imagined futures reflect their desire for continuity.

### Conclusions

In this chapter, I have provided case studies of three Elder Goths to examine how middle-aged adults conceptualize their relationship with Goth throughout their lives and have shaped their adulthoods to allow for subcultural participation. Similar to Jacquelin and Vince in *Portlandia*, these Elder Goths subvert the narrative of social aging through embracing an ideology over their life course involving images of darkness, morbidity, anger and death. In contrast to Hodgkinson's perspective of British Goths as a collectively aging community bonded by shared tastes and styles, Goths in Baltimore place more importance on individualism with more spectacular styles fading into the background; or in the case of Neska, spectacular style was never a large part of her relationship with the subculture; Goth is a feeling of belonging

from adolescence onward which is so strong that it has negated the need to wear Gothic dress. Their Gothic temporalities reflect the mesh of middle class lifeways and alternative temporalities expressed in their individual lives. Linda has fashioned a life where she can dress however she wants in the workplace, and without children, can go out to nightclubs multiple times per week. Michael's internalized ideologies, which are also informed by his identification with punk, work towards easing the contradictions of being a priest and a Goth. Neska, whose life path and employment as a DJ is tied to her relationship with music, experiences Goth as a form of embodiment and a sense of connection. Goth has become more internalized, but the importance of subcultural participation in their lives have not changed in significant ways since their youth.

## Chapter 5: A Tale of Two Nightclubs: The Baltimore Gothscape

Isabella Van Elferen describes the Gothic nightclub experience as an “embodied form of ceremonial Gothic... in the case of Goth club nights, the revenants of Gothic past, present, and future are warmly invited in through setting, music, and various performative practices.”<sup>155</sup> This transgression of boundaries of time can also translate to breaking down of age categories. Rather than viewing nightclubs as places for youth only, nightclubs which welcome Elder Goths are transgressive because they provide spaces for communal aging. In this chapter, I provide a historical overview of the Baltimore club scene and cultural landscape, which has shifted over time as clubs have closed. Elder Goths have moved from attendance at The Orpheus, Baltimore’s oldest Goth club, towards the dance night Elektroschock held at the gay and lesbian club Grand Central, and the small dive bar The Depot, which has catered to Gothic tastes since the mid-1980s. Through ethnographic interviews, I briefly explore nightclub attendance for Baltimore’s Elder Goths; the Depot has become a “home” for socialization and creating a shared history rather than dancing. I conclude by discussing how the physical layout of these clubs has continually created physical spaces for subverting cultural constructions of age-appropriate normativity by attending to Elder Gothic desires and norms.

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<sup>155</sup> Van Elferen, 142.

*Creating Gothscapes: Nightlife Over the Age of 40*

At first, November 21, 2015 appears to be a typical Saturday night at any small Baltimore nightclub. Outside the Depot, located in the gentrifying Station North Arts and Entertainment District, thumping bass and drums echo through the open door while revelers spill out into the street, smoking, chatting, and laughing before returning to down another cheap drink. But inside the club is where the Depot begins to diverge from the norm. The smoke-filled dance floor is empty. Lasers and a disco ball illuminate the mirrors surrounding the room which reflect only themselves. And despite the loud music, the DJ booth is vacant. Everyone in attendance, including that night's DJs, Neska and Cerberus, is sitting at the bar around the corner talking with each other while drinking mixed drinks and white wine. Black clothes, heavy makeup, tattoos, and grey hair are in abundance. Instead of the latest Top 40 hits celebrating romance and sex or featuring wordless dance beats, the music blasting over the loudspeakers focuses on themes of despair, depression, and death. The walls display paintings for sale featuring women in stereotypical pinup poses, but wearing black clothes and bondage gear instead of polka dot bikinis. Rather than sports coverage, both televisions are playing the horror film *Bride of Chucky*. And everyone at the Depot, bar myself, is over the age of 40.

According to Hodkinson, the primary element of participation in the Goth subculture is attendance at nightclub events which provide a space for appreciation of shared tastes,<sup>156</sup> and Baltimore proves to be no exception. Sociologists Paul

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<sup>156</sup> Hodkinson, *Goth*, 91.



Chatterton and Robert Hollands describe “urban nightscapes” as a global phenomenon where young adults use the city as a place of consumption, play, and hedonism in the evening.<sup>157</sup> Following from Anya Heise-von der Lipp’s description of Gothic spaces in twentieth-century literature as artificially constructed; “a dark mirror-space reflecting the particular culture that created them,”<sup>158</sup> I have previously argued that Gothic spaces are created in dark, dimly lit nightclubs by clubgoers, DJs, and bands whose shared style reflects and reinforces their communal bonds.<sup>159</sup> The darkness of Goth is clearly present in the club atmosphere through loud angry and intense music with cryptic lyrics, dark colored furniture, morbidly themed artwork and decorations with bats and vampires, and of course, the presence of black-clad Goths. But perhaps “Gothscape,” borrowing from Chatterton and Hollands’s “nightscape,” can be used as an additional term along with “Gothic Space” to express the shared characteristics of these Baltimore Gothic events, as they are sites of nocturnal socialization and enjoyment forming part of a broader urban cultural landscape.

As a cultural landscape, a nightclub is a site for the construction of meaning and subcultural identities. In these dark, music filled spaces, shared histories are created over time which extend beyond the liminal experience of attending events. Gothic nightlife in Baltimore began in the mid-1980s and currently centers around

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<sup>157</sup> Paul Chatterton and Robert Hollands, *Urban Nightscapes: Youth Cultures, Pleasure Spaces and Corporate Power* (London: Routledge, 2003), 4.

<sup>158</sup> Anya Heise-von der Lipp, Introduction to *Dark Cartographies: Exploring Gothic Spaces*, edited by Anya Heise-von der Lipp (Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2013).

<sup>159</sup> Bush, “Creating Gothic Spaces.”

three clubs: Orpheus, Baltimore's oldest alternative club, located in Little Italy; the monthly dance night Elektroschock at the upscale gay and lesbian nightclub Grand Central in stately Mt. Vernon which attracts a wider array of clubgoers; and The Depot, a small dive bar one mile north in the Station North neighborhood, which has become the heart of the adult Baltimore Gothic community. The Depot holds the newest Goth-themed monthly dance night in the city, "Batz Over Baltimore," which celebrated its fifth anniversary on November 21, 2015.

Although Orpheus was the center of nightlife in the 1980s and 1990s, older Goths have migrated farther north towards The Depot and Elektroschock, with Michael and Linda describing the Orpheus as a venue that now "sucks" and "is really annoying" because of the club's poor service and shifting focus to anime, cosplay, and fetish nights which cater to a younger crowd. The Orpheus, an 18 and older club, has become a space for youth where middle-aged adults no longer feel welcome. Goodlad and Bibby argue that Goth has never truly been appropriated by the mainstream because Goths make a deliberate choice to "police Goth boundaries through autoethnographic discourse to ward off processes of defusion or recuperation,"<sup>160</sup> and the physical boundaries of Goth in Baltimore have shifted towards the Depot as Goths have moved into middle age, perhaps in response to the wider incorporation of sartorial and musical styles at the Orpheus. Linda recalls that the last time that the Orpheus had a huge following of adults was 2005, with the club's focus shifting towards youth so much since that time that Neska refuses to DJ at the Orpheus. Her crowd of fans and friends will no longer attend events there.

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<sup>160</sup> Goodlad and Bibby, 18.

Michael describes the current Orpheus crowd as young adults who are essentially poseurs: “You have lots of white kids in big ‘90s pants who are into what they think of as steampunk and Tool, and that’s somehow Goth... but there’s nothing Goth about wearing homemade steampunk clothing and jumping around to Tool in your juggalo t-shirt.” For Linda, the contemporary Orpheus experience has become unpleasant and “too much to handle”; she prefers the familiarity of the Depot over the young crowd at the Orpheus. As Goth is a form of belonging for her, she no longer wants to go to a dance club where she feels like she does not fit in.

When mapped onto the cityscape, Baltimore Gothic encounters for adults over 40 are now concentrated in two nightclubs on the same street, Grand Central and the Depot, where expressions the remnants of spectacular and flamboyant styles of Goth in the 1980s and 1990s are encouraged, even in the face of potential scorn or harassment by non-Goths at Grand Central. I noticed that something seemed different from other nightclubs during my first visits in summer 2013. I was aware of Elektroschock from promotional materials on Facebook, and when a friend invited me to go with him and meet Linda there, I jumped at the chance. As an introverted suburban dweller, I had no experience with clubbing in Baltimore City. My only experience with the club world was visiting a handful of straight clubs on a trip to Miami Beach when I was in my mid-twenties; places which I found to be horribly loud, dreadfully expensive, and rather dull. Those clubs were packed with partygoers and geared towards dancing in medium to large groups in physical spaces which Quian Hui Tan describes as “heterosexual marketplaces” capitalizing on the allure of

hegemonically ideal bodies.<sup>161</sup> From my previous observations, the purpose of clubgoing was akin to Chatterton and Hollands's descriptions of urban clubs as "liminal and carnivalesque social spaces... of play and hedonism."<sup>162</sup> Young adults went to clubs together to drink, dance, and meet other young adults with the possibility of sexual encounters. The hegemonically ideal bodies in Miami clubs were always young; no one over 30 was in sight. These were spaces for youth, and youth alone. The Baltimore Gothscape immediately struck me as different from the South Beach clubs, and not just because the Baltimore crowds were older, no one was drunk, and there was minimal or no cover: most people were sitting and talking with each other. The large, expansive dance floors were mostly empty until late into the night, and when Goths did dance, they mostly danced alone. Touching on the dance floor was forbidden. The music was played at a quieter volume which allowed for conversation outside of the dance floor. Something was very, very different.

### Elektroschock: A Queer Subcultural Mesh

Goth has a long association with gay nightclubs; a symbiotic relationship of "outsiders" and "misfits"<sup>163</sup> where Goth scenes<sup>164</sup> provide spaces for embracing

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<sup>161</sup> Quan Hui Tan, "Postfeminist possibilities: unpacking the paradoxical performances of heterosexualized femininity in club spaces," *Social and Cultural Geography* 15, no. 1 (2014):24.

<sup>162</sup> Chatterton and Hollands, 11. The authors go on to critique readings of nightclubbing as play and hedonism for all; it is mitigated by inequalities which exclude marginalized young people from nightclubs.

<sup>163</sup> Both Neska and Linda described Goths, gays, and lesbians as being closely connected. According to Linda, it's because "we're all misfits!"

<sup>164</sup> There is also significant debate over the nature of subcultures and "scenes" which is beyond the scope of this project. I use the term "scene" in this section, following the words of my informants, who always described Goth nightlife in Baltimore as a "scene."

gender ambiguities, alleviating anxieties over masculine/feminine norms, and expressing all kinds of sexual identities.<sup>165</sup> Roy Retrofit describes gay clubs as “a wonderful subcultural mesh allowing alternative scenes to survive.” Because of this mesh, it is no surprise that the most flamboyant Gothic identities are expressed in Baltimore at Elektroschock, a 21 and over monthly dance event held at the gay and lesbian club Grand Central. The “transgression, reinvention, and aesthetic fluidity”<sup>166</sup> Will Straw describes as a part of music scenes are particularly apparent in the wide variety of people which attends Elektroschock, which is marketed as “the best mix of industrial, synthpop, powernoise, electroclash, underground, 80s, 90s and more...”<sup>167</sup> Perhaps because of its location in a neighborhood historically known for young and middle-aged gay nightlife, Elektroschock is an age diverse space. The dance night tilts towards younger clubgoers in their 20s and 30s, although many adults over 40 are in attendance. A generic disco ball represents the dance night on Elektroschock’s website, suggesting that promoting an overall nightclub atmosphere holds primacy over directly targeting older Goths. Elektroschock is also a stylistically diverse space. Although various forms of black attire predominate, female attendees arrive wearing a variety of spectacular styles: Victorian inspired “trad-Goth” corsets, black fishnet stockings, patent leather heels, Halloween costumes, and dresses made out of PVC. Some men transgress gender boundaries through drag and “Brony” outfits worn by members of the “My Little Pony” television show fan culture, while others wear more

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<sup>165</sup> Gunn, 46.

<sup>166</sup> Straw, “The Urban Night,” 199.

<sup>167</sup> “Elektroschock,” *Elektroschock.net*, <http://www.elektroschock.net/Site/Home.html>

traditionally masculinized garb: studded leather, black cowboy hats, gigantic leather boots with spikes, and kilts.

As welcoming as Elektroschock is for these displays of spectacular style, clear boundaries are apparent between Goths and outsiders. Sarah Thornton writes that “the ‘mainstream’ is the entity against which the majority of club members define themselves,”<sup>168</sup> and “mainstream” non-Goths are welcome to attend the event only if they do not violate Gothic spatial norms which emphasize giving other individuals “space on the dance floor.”<sup>169</sup> At every Elektroschock, a handful of straight and gay non-Goths (colloquially referred to as “normies” by the Goths in attendance) attend wearing street clothes and come to dance, stare at and occasionally mock the wide variety of sartorial styles on display. The adult Goths are unperturbed at their presence except when the “normies” disrespect the space of others. When a large group of straight female “normies” in their early twenties tossed their oversized handbags in the middle of the floor, started yelling “Woooo!!” and created a conga line which took up the entire dance floor at Elektroschock in March 2016, confused and unhappy Goths were relegated to the margins of the club. Linda and transgender African-American Goth Violet stopped dancing when the “normies” arrived and came over to me, puzzled over why heterosexual women wearing upper middle class dress – pastel sweater sets, pearl necklaces, and pumps - would come to a gay club. Linda whispered in my ear “You ought to write your dissertation on why people like *that*

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<sup>168</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>169</sup> Amy Wilkins, *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians: The Boundaries of Sex, Style, and Status* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 63.

come here! This is awful! When will those “wooo girls” leave?” Goth boundaries are redrawn around behavior and style to exclude outsiders who interrupt.



**Figure 6. Linda (center) dancing amongst an array of styles at Elektroschock’s “Retroshock” edition.** Photo taken by the author during the early morning of December 6, 2015.

#### Gothic Experiences at the Depot

Less fluid than Elektroschock but more specifically Gothic are the aesthetics displayed at the small Depot, a dive bar<sup>170</sup> located five blocks north in the Station North neighborhood, which has hosted Goth themed events since the mid-1980s and opened under current management in 1998 after a brief failed stint as a gay bar called

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<sup>170</sup> The Depot does not self-identify as a straight or queer bar.

“The Stud.” Over the past twenty-five years, the small Depot has become the center of adult Gothic life, being home to multiple DJ nights and live Goth and industrial band shows per month, birthday gatherings, and the wedding reception of Roy Retrofit and Ada Ruiz in October 2009, who comprise the husband and wife synthpop duo Red This Ever.

The Depot’s location in Station North, the first area in Baltimore to receive the state designation as an Arts and Entertainment District, is an amalgam of artist live-work spaces, galleries, nightclubs, and rowhomes directly north of Penn Station,<sup>171</sup> may have contributed to the club’s unusual longevity. Station North was designated as an Arts and Entertainment District in 2002, after other clubs catering to a Gothic clientele on the same street, Godfrey’s, the after-hours gay club Cignal, and the Rev, were closed. Chatterton and Hollands write that “urban nightlife contains a number of contradictory tendencies towards both deregulation and regulation, and fun and disorder... it has become an arena for a more complex set of negotiations for a range of groups” including club attendees, police, and governmental bodies<sup>172</sup> which raises the possibility that the Depot, in a state designated district, is kept afloat by the same neoliberal forces which have led to the closure of so many other venues in the Baltimore area. Many of the large bars and nightclubs in neighboring Baltimore County, such as the metal club Sinix in Essex, and The Barn in Carney, have shuttered their doors as the owners ran out of money,<sup>173</sup> or reinvented themselves as

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<sup>171</sup> <http://www.stationnorth.org/about/>

<sup>172</sup> Chatterton and Hollands, 10.

<sup>173</sup> Frank Bohmer, Jr. “An Open Letter,” ShowListDC.com, December 24, 2012. <http://www.showlistdc.com/sinix.php>. Accessed December 5, 2015.



full service restaurants serving locally sourced foods and craft beers<sup>174</sup> which appeal to a middle-aged suburban clientele who prefer mainstream cover bands and tribute acts to DJs. Despite an influx of government funding, Station North and the Depot intentionally retain a bit of the neighborhood's original seedy character. Roy Retrofit described the Depot to CBS Baltimore as "a small, grungy, totally unpretentious place with great music,"<sup>175</sup> and this seediness and grittiness underscores that experiencing the Gothic urban night at the Depot is transgressive for middle-aged adults who can afford to attend more expensive venues closer to suburban homes.

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<sup>174</sup> Nick Gestido, "The Barn Taphouse Opens in Carney," May 7, 2013. <http://patch.com/maryland/parkville/the-barn-taphouse-opens-in-carney>. Accessed December 5, 2015.

<sup>175</sup> Roy Retrofit, interview with Amy McNeal, "Baltimore Music Scene Spotter, Roy Retrofit and DJ Neska," *CBS Baltimore* (Baltimore, Maryland), March 15, 2012. <http://baltimore.cbslocal.com/2012/03/15/baltimore-music-scene-spotter-roy-retrofit-and-dj-neska/>. Accessed December 5, 2015.



**Figure 7. The Depot’s location in Station North during Batz over Baltimore.** A cold snap during that evening sent the usual number of clubgoers hanging around outside the Depot back indoors. Photo taken by the author on March 19, 2016.

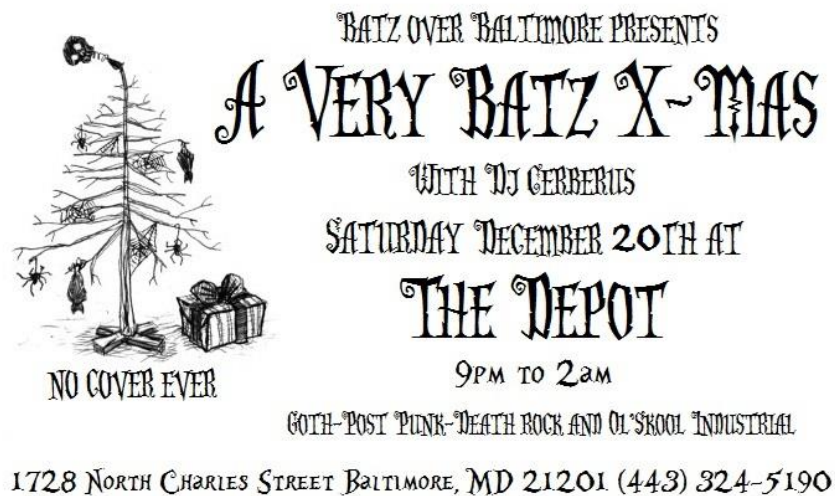
As part of the greater Gothscape, I have previously argued that the Depot is a dedicated Gothic Space for two primary reasons: the frequency of nightclub events – many of which have no cover - catering to a Gothic clientele, and the marketing of these events via social media featuring Gothic themes and imagery.<sup>176</sup> The club has always had a Gothic flavor; as Linda phrases it – “[the Depot] will always be mostly on the darker side.” She describes the 1980s and 1990s scene at Depot as an exclusive space: “we were a bit more snobby, like heaven forbid you wore jeans. Nobody wore jeans in the Depot!... If you did, you probably got stared down. I’m not saying they had a dress code, but nobody really went [to the Depot or Orpheus] that looked

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<sup>176</sup> Bush, “Creating Gothic Spaces.”

normal! [*Laughs*] Not everybody looks Goth anymore [at the Depot], but they also don't look like Oxford khaki wearing people either."

The Depot may be less exclusive than twenty years ago, but the association with Gothic transgression lingers into the twenty-first century. In addition to Batz, the club currently hosts multiple Goth and industrial themed dance party nights per week, such as "Church," featuring resident DJ 333 and guest DJ Ellen Degenerate, and marketed with creative adjectives describing an amalgam of Gothic imagery: "witchhaus," "nu-goth," and "minimalwave" – and artwork of the religious iconography common to the subculture.<sup>177</sup> Promotional materials on Facebook featuring drawings of stylized bats and other Gothic images make it clear that Batz is blatantly targeted towards an audience which enjoys older forms of Goth music: "Goth-Post Punk-Death Rock and Ol'Skool Industrial."



**Figure 8. Promotional ad for "Batz Over Baltimore" featuring specific Gothic imagery in order to target "Ol'Skool Goths."**<sup>178</sup>

<sup>177</sup> "Church," Facebook event, March 11, 2015, accessed December 13, 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/events/1563352433945009/>

<sup>178</sup> Caldwell, C.B. (DJ Cerberus). Batz Over Baltimore Facebook Group. Photograph posted December 17, 2014. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/Batzoverbaltimore/>

### Nightclubs and Middle Age

Sociologists have suggested that for adult subcultural members, going out to nightclubs is a way of living in denial of the aging process by holding onto youthful activities. In *Club Cultures*, Thornton writes that older adults participate in British dance music scenes as a buffer against social aging [and] resigning oneself to one's position in a highly stratified society."<sup>179</sup> Nicola Smith believes that the appeal of participation for adult subcultural members is the same as it was in youth - "to possess an identity and a form of cultural involvement that results in the achievement of scene-specific status, personhood, and subsequent selfhood."<sup>180</sup> From these perspectives, subcultural membership is pleasure-oriented and a way to hold onto one's youth; a way to feel young again, not a part of a middle-aged adult's identity.

So what keeps Elder Goths going to the Depot, a club where almost everyone in attendance is their age or older? Hodkinson writes that older Goths have become more familiar and secure within Goth spaces as they have aged,<sup>181</sup> and Bennett describes aging dance music enthusiasts as confronted with the challenge of adapting the demands of dancing with an aging body and adult responsibilities as a form of "achieving and maintaining sustainable fun."<sup>182</sup> But going to the Depot is more than a type of "sustainable fun" for adult Goths – it is a site of belonging and the creation of community, and over the past thirty years, has become a site of collective aging.

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<sup>179</sup> Thornton, 102.

<sup>180</sup> Smith, 436.

<sup>181</sup> Hodkinson, *Ageing*, 274.

<sup>182</sup> Bennett, *Music, Style, and Aging*, 118.

According to Van Elferen, boundaries of gender, history, and sexual practices at Goth dance nights become opportunities rather than obstacles,<sup>183</sup> and attending Goth nights at the Depot over a long span of time provides opportunities for breaking down the boundaries between youth, where subcultural participation is sanctioned, and adulthood, where it is considered deviant, and understanding nightclubs as spaces which have aged in tandem with their regular attendees.

Gullette writes that the focus of age identity is on the meaning of “long time”<sup>184</sup> – narratives over the life course rather than a series of highlights or short term events - and my informants’ age identities have been intertwined with the Depot since they were teenagers. In a joint interview with CBS Baltimore in 2012, Roy and Neska concurred that “the Depot is like a home for most of us.”<sup>185</sup> This sense of community shaped their Gothic temporalities and keeps them returning to the club. Neska’s life course narrative first viewed the Depot as a life goal. As a teenage DJ who started her career at illegal suburban underground parties and snuck out of the house to hang out at Goth clubs while underage, she aspired to becoming a DJ at the Depot, an accomplishment which she achieved in 1998 at the age of 25. Her Gothic temporality, centered around music and embodiment, is oriented towards nightclub spaces rather than homeownership and a nuclear family. This is reflected in the clothing that she sports in the club which literally spells out her self-identifications as a freak and a weirdo. Wearing t-shirts with the words “DEVIANT” or “CAUSTIC”

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<sup>183</sup> Van Elferen, 141.

<sup>184</sup> Gullette, 125.

<sup>185</sup> Retrofit and DJ Neska, interview with Amy McNeal.

printed on them in large lettering in a dedicated Gothic Space reinscribes her Gothic identity and underscores her Elder status at the club.

Michael's and Linda's reasons for attendance involve consistency and familiarity; the Depot is a place to spend time with old friends and enjoy music. Hanging out at clubs simultaneously fulfills two of Michael's core needs: socialization and seeing live music.

I'm a very social creature, so for me, I love live music more than almost anything. I love live music so much that I don't understand people who don't like it. . . . My mind does not understand people who are like "I don't really go see bands." "What do you DO? What do you DO if you don't go see live bands?" Besides just the absolute need to see live bands, I just like seeing my friends because especially because at 40, almost 41, there are fewer and fewer outlets for that. And I don't see them at work, I don't see them at school, I don't go to school because I'm middle-aged.

Going out to clubs compensates for the lost opportunities for socialization that occur with taking on responsibilities of homeownership and child-rearing, and accordingly, every time I have seen Michael at the Depot, he has been standing at the bar talking with friends instead of dancing. His dress has remained a constant in his life path, and is the same inside the club as outside the club – black button down shirt, black pants, and white clerical collar. The Depot has become a home for him because it is a primary location for him to spend time with longtime friends outside of the familial environment.

Going out to the Depot as an adult is a form of nostalgia for Linda and a chance for her to socialize with old friends. Although she thinks that the Depot has changed somewhat since the 1980s, it remains a place where she can return to a time in life when she had fewer responsibilities.

[The Depot] is so much different than it was in the early days, it was all cool, weird people who weren't normal who wore leather jackets and saved up their money so they could drink there ... I don't know if someone could even re-create the atmosphere, it was a time and it was a place, and there was certain music that was being played back then. Batz over Baltimore sort of gets it right which is why I really like that night... and old school Goth – part of [why I like] it is nostalgia because that's what I grew up with as a young person in my 20s, and I feel that a lot of it has a very timeless nature to it.

Linda splits her time at Batz between talking with her longtime friends and dancing, often abruptly leaving conversations mid-phrase to run to the dance floor when a song she is particularly fond of starts playing over the club's speakers. The music that draws her to the dance floor are songs from the 1980s by formative Goth and Industrial bands like The Cure, Sisters of Mercy, Joy Division, and Depeche Mode. Unlike Elektroschock, which generally plays more contemporary Gothic dance music from the 1990s to today, the Depot's DJs play the original single mixes of 1980s songs, not the extended dance and club remixes which deconstruct songs into discrete parts which can sound nothing like the original recording. Hearing those songs in their entirety allows Linda to relive experiences of hearing them at the Depot, and in her everyday life, in the 1980s. Going out to club nights also provides opportunities for her to attract attention by dressing up in flamboyant outfits reminiscent of what she wore to clubs in her youth. Although she has toned down her everyday style over time, the Depot remains a place for her to let her “[freak] flag fly!”

#### *Deviant Orientations: Elder Goth Experiences Inside the Club*

Both Elektroschock and the Depot are laid out in a way which is conducive to nightclub experiences which suit the desires of adult Goths: conversation and communal belonging. Sara Ahmed writes in *Queer Phenomenology* that “to make

things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things,”<sup>186</sup> and their disordered layouts deviates from traditional nightclub floor plans which place primacy on drinking and dancing. In a study of queer clubs in New York City, Fiona Buckland writes that “orientations have a double meaning in a queer club,” referring to participants’ need to exert a map of over a space which they could orient themselves around so they knew where they were and where they wanted to be, and also their need to orient themselves within a matrix of (homo)sexuality outside of the heteronormative outside world.<sup>187</sup> Following from Buckland, as Elektroschock is held at a gay and lesbian club, the event can be viewed as a queer, disordered space. Walking down a long, dark hallway to enter the main dance floor of Grand Central symbolizes the transition from the outside world into a physical space where the expressions of the flamboyant and non-normative are welcomed. For adults in their 40s, entering into the presence of a multitude of sexual and subcultural identities in a queer space filled with loud music is part of their investment in an alternative temporality centered around participation in dance nights; rather than being ordered around middle class lifeways, their lives are dis-ordered around regular attendance at dance nights.

“Things” within clubs can be disordered to create spaces for aging. In “Thing Theory,” Bill Brown differentiates between “things” and “objects.” The former disrupts thoughts and actions through a relationship with a human subject – “the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.”<sup>188</sup> All nightclubs

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<sup>186</sup> Ahmed, 161.

<sup>187</sup> Fiona Buckland, *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World-Making* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 56-57.

<sup>188</sup> Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (1) (Autumn 2001), 4.



are full of objects – chairs, bars, drinks, DJ booths, mirrors – and particularly at the Depot, these objects become things through their relationships with clubgoers. The orientations and positioning of these things within the nightclub’s floor plan disorders nightclub experiences and aligns with the non-normative status of adult Goths. Physically being present at the nightclub directs attention to these deviant structures and creates spaces for the display of adult Gothic identities. This type of “material deviance”<sup>189</sup> of things within the club becomes another way of constructing the nightclub spaces, and following from that, adult Gothic identities, as deviant.

The Depot is a space for subculturally sanctioned aging as the club’s priorities have stayed in sync with the Gothic community. Ahmed writes that orientation is about how the body, spatial elements, and the social are entangled,<sup>190</sup> and at the Depot, adult Gothic bodies interact with the physical layout of the club in ways which encourage socialization and camaraderie, creating a sense of community that has endured for almost thirty years. Located on the second floor of a long, narrow rowhome built in 1900, the Depot is bifurcated into two areas: the bar and the dance floor, which are visible to each other and around fifteen feet apart. The bar area, which curves around the entrance, is filled with forms of comfortable seating: red bar stools; black leather sofas facing each other across from the bar, and a set of large, comfortable chairs with Gothic decorations placed closer to the dance floor. Gothic themed artwork by local artists for sale covers the dark purple walls. A rectangular area in the back of the rowhome surrounded by mirrors on three sides serves as a dance floor and functions as a stage for live bands. The orientations of these things do

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<sup>189</sup> Herring. n.p.

<sup>190</sup> Ahmed., 181.

not at first seem deviant, as every nightclub needs a place for people to dance and order a drink, but the orientations begin to deviate from the norm when clubgoers arrive, filling up the seats to talk with one another, and leaving the dance floor empty.

The social element of Goth for adults is thus entangled with the spatial. Most Goths in attendance sit on the black leather sofas facing each other, or at the bar stools which they turn away from the bar and talk well into the night, congregating in small groups which shift about as friends come and go, or turn their stools towards the bar, watching the horror films playing on the club's satellite television system. Hodkinson writes that comfort, both avoiding physical discomfort associated with uncomfortable Gothic clothing and developing a desire to dance and socialize without attracting excessive attention, is increasingly important to older Goths.<sup>191</sup> Rather than being oriented communally towards the dance floor to share an experience through dancing, Goths disorder the club by becoming oriented separately towards objects for physical comfort – the soft chairs and leather sofas. Communal bonds are created by the conversations that occur while they are seated. Common topics reflect the priorities of a community moving into middle age: a mix of daily life events, current and past musical tastes, and sharing stories of attending concerts in the past, topics which have shifted over time to reflect adult life. According to Linda, “I think things [I talk about at the Depot now] have changed a little bit to reflect my age and my maturity... I talk to my friends and get caught up in ‘How was your week?’ and ‘What was going on?’ We might talk about music because we are immersed in the music and we’re hearing stuff – ‘Oh yeah, I haven’t heard that in years!’ Or ‘I really

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<sup>191</sup> Hodkinson, *Ageing*, 274.

love this song!’ Or ‘I hate that song!’” The approach to conversation is longitudinal, reflecting the fact that Elder Goths have grown up and grown older together. Devoid of sexual content, their conversation’s substance, music and everyday life, deviates from heteronormative nightclub talk as a type of “erotic communication” where men often verbally degrade women.<sup>192</sup>

The layout of the Depot creates an immediate sense of connection by eliminating the divide between musical performers and audience members. Unlike Grand Central, where the DJ booth is high above the dance floor, severing the connection between the DJ and the audience, the Depot’s DJ booth is at floor level, allowing Neska to leave the booth to speak to her friends and return to the booth to change songs. The community aspect at the Depot is even more apparent during their live music nights. As the club lacks a raised stage, bands perform directly on the wooden dance floor, surrounded by the audience on three sides and in close quarters, allowing attendees to mingle freely with the band members before, after, and sometimes during the performances.

Baltimore DJs and bands thrive on the communicatory experiences which occur through material deviance. Roy, of Red This Ever, has integrated audience participation and props into the band’s live performances since the band’s first live show. “Things” play a huge part in Red This Ever’s performances. When my band opened for Red This Ever in 2012 at the Sidebar, a punk venue in Baltimore, Roy, armed with a wireless microphone, followed audience members around the club even when it annoyed them and they tried to escape his presence, complimenting people’s

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<sup>192</sup> Tan, “Flirtatious geographies: clubs as spaces for the performance of affective heterosexualities,” *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 20, no. 6 (2013): 728.

outfits, getting in their faces, and passed around signs, small plastic toy soldiers and an inflatable alligator. When I interviewed him for a project on musicians in 2014, I wanted to know why he began interacting with the audience and how toys wound up being tossed around like candy at a nightclub. Roy's answer was simple; props started off as a way to combat nervousness about performing and became a recurring part of their show because of the positive audience reaction. His experience with audience participation began when he purchased a book about world religions and was unhappy to find out that it was actually religious propaganda, and ripped pages out of the book onstage to the lyrics of his song "Proliferation," about powerful people dominating others: "When I started incorporating doing things TO the audience, I think I realized that, and then I let audience members rip pages out themselves, then I started realizing, well, I like doing things WITH the audience!"

Brown writes that "things lie beyond the ground of intelligibility the way mere things lie outside of the grid of museal exhibition, outside the order of objects,"<sup>193</sup> and Roy turns what were once only objects - religious texts, signs, and toys – which lie outside of the codex of the nightclub environment, into things through creating a three way relationship between himself, the audience, and the props. When placed into a nightclub environment, these things, which would normally be considered inappropriate in a nightclub, create deviant orientations that bind the Gothic community together. Audience members moving towards the "stage" and holding up signs with the lyrics for the song "Fairytale Gone out of Style" are pulled into interaction with band members Roy and Ada, becoming part of the group and also

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<sup>193</sup> Brown, 5.

part of the built environment that surrounds them, with band, audience, club melding into one.



**Figure 9.** Red This Ever performing the song “Fairytale Gone Out of Style.” Fan Ulka Panzer holds the “Turn Into a Sharper Knife” sign. Photo taken by the author at the Sidebar in 2012.



**Figure 10. Roy (center) on the keytar as a guest musician with the band Retrogramme at the Depot.** The lack of stage draws audience members close the audience is to the band. Musician Spacey of the band Skydivers is directly behind Roy. The DJ booth is at floor level directly behind Spacey and Red This Ever bassist Ada Ruiz. Photo taken by Shane Gardner of the Baltimore band Stars and the Sea on December 4, 2015 and used with his permission.

*Deviant Dancing: Adult Gothic Spatial Norms on the Dance Floor*

When adult Goths do dance in Baltimore, their respect of the spatial boundaries of others on the dance floor departs from the norm of interpersonal interactions at both straight and queer nightclubs. Tan describes straight clubs as “flirtatious geographies” which are sites for performances of affective heterosexualities: “an attunement to the ways in which ‘becoming heterosexual’ is being felt as affective tendencies that are transmitted among dancing bodies.”<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Tan, “Flirtatious geographies: clubs as spaces for the performance of affective heterosexualities,” *Gender, Place, and Culture* 20 (6), 791.

Buckland writes that dancing in queer clubs plays a role in queer-world making through physicality and embodiment of “experience, identity, and community.”<sup>195</sup> In both types of clubs, physical movements on the dance floor create connections between individual dancing bodies and groups of dancers.

In an inversion of these traditional “crowd-based”<sup>196</sup> club experiences, Goths give each other room for dancing, creating a form of material deviance on the dance floor where bodies are oriented away from each other rather than dancing together. Amy Wilkins describes the Goth community’s spatial rules on the dance floor as a site of solitary, stylized dance routines with each individual taking up significant room on the dance floor, and without a line of men along the wall ogling the dancers.<sup>197</sup> Goths at Elektroschock generally follow these spatial norms, even when the dance floor becomes crowded towards early morning: twirling solo out of sync with the music or dancing in a ballet-like manner with a friend or partner. Middle-aged men dancing alone early in the evening are the exception, taking up large areas on the dance floor with expressions of intense concentration on their faces, and moving in a more aggressive manner than Goth women who are dancing alone or in same sex pairs. Neska generally spins in wide circles with a friendly smile on her face, giving her friends enough room for large physical movements. Linda dances in small spaces on the dance floor, closing her eyes and turning her body back in forth in time to the music. Together, their dancing bodies transmit tendencies which are disordered from normative nightclub behavior displayed by the “normies” in

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<sup>195</sup> Buckland, 2.

<sup>196</sup> Ben Malbon, *Clubbing, Ecstasy, Vitality* (London: Routledge, 1999), 71.

<sup>197</sup> Wilkins, 63.

attendance, who dance in large groups, conforming to sexualized nightclub behavioral norms by bumping, grinding, and yelling.

Goth's spatial rules are observed more strictly at the Depot, where fewer "normies" attend. Attendees at Batz almost always dance alone, arms outstretched or reaching towards the high ceiling, singing along to the music with their eyes closed, immersed in individualized experiences created by movement and music. In a "nonrepresentational theory or the theory of practices," Nigel Thrift links together performativity, bodily practices, and dance, moving away from a conversation about representation and text and choosing dance as a "concentrated example of the expressive nature of embodiment."<sup>198</sup> Through expressive dance moves, embodied practices create intensely personal moments for dancing Goths. In those moments on the dance floor, Goth is understood as an experience, not a particular style of dress. Thornton describes clubs as "other-worldly environments in which to escape... interior havens with such presence that the dancers forget local time and place and sometimes even participate in an imaginary global village of dance sounds."<sup>199</sup> Clubs become a safe haven from the outside world and allow for the imagination of alternate Gothic realities. The purpose of dancing for Linda is an escape from the stress of adult responsibilities:

Dancing is music therapy and stress relief and I feel that it's leaving real life and going into this nice fantasy world where my inner batteries recharge and I feel like I'm around people that are similar to me. I want to be absorbed into the music and I sort of feel energized. I feel like I'm living in that moment, truly, feeling what life force and energy is all about.

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<sup>198</sup> Nigel Thrift, quoted in Catherine Nash, "Performativity in practice: some recent work in cultural geography," *Progress in Human Geography* 24 (4) 2000: 655-656.

<sup>199</sup> Thornton, 21.

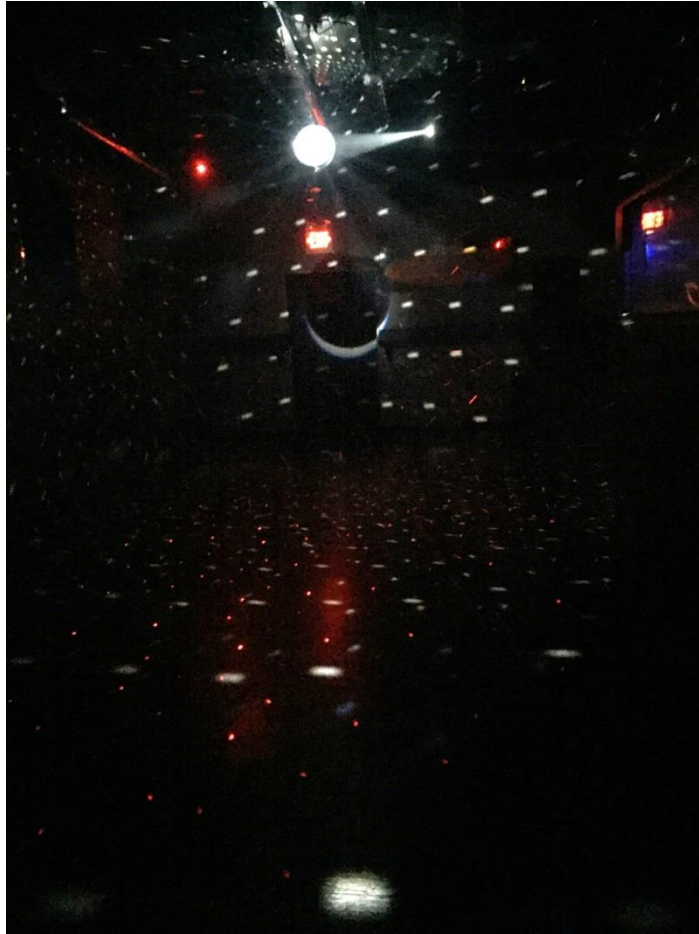


Rather than going to the club to dance with people, Linda is dancing *around* – proximal to - people. The large, fluid bodily gestures she performs on the dance floor at Batz, compared the smaller movements she performs at Elektroschock, serve the purpose of keeping others at arms' length to preserve her personalized experience of escapism. People on the dance floor are proximate, but not too close for comfort.

But surrounded by mirrors on three sides, Goths at the Depot are not truly dancing alone, even when they have the dance floor to themselves. They are dancing with their own reflections, creating a Gothic “mirror-space” which reflects their subcultural identities. In those mirrors, Goths see the deviant objects and displays of age-inappropriate non-normativity, which, as a part of their community, are now proximal to them, and have been incorporated into their lives. The performative aspects of Gothic dancing – performing the same dance moves in the same club over a large number of years, doubled by the mirrors - reinscribe their commitment to the community and move towards a Gothic future. Ahmed writes that “the temporality of orientation reminds us that orientations are effects of what we tend toward, where the ‘toward’ marks a space that is almost, but not quite, available in the present.”<sup>200</sup> By tending toward subcultural participation and away from normative temporalities throughout their life course, Elder Goths can successfully imagine their futures as continuations of what society terms to be deviance. Neska, Linda, and Michael have been dancing at the Depot for over twenty-five years, their deviant orientations continuing to keep Goth alive.

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<sup>200</sup> Ahmed, 20.



**Figure 11. A completely empty dance floor at the Depot.** The disco ball in the center is surrounded by mirrors. Photo taken by the author on March 19, 2016 at 11:28pm.

### Conclusions

In this chapter, I have explored Elder Gothic non-normativity for adults over 40 inside the club environment in three ways. First, based on Chatterton and Hollands's term "nightscape," I have provided an overview of the current Baltimore "Gothscape" for adults 40 and over, which has shifted away from Baltimore's original Goth club, the Orpheus, which now caters towards non-Gothic youth, and towards Elektroschock, a dance night at a gay club, and the Depot, a small dive bar. Second, I have briefly discussed reasons that Elder Goths attend the Depot throughout

adulthood as part of their individualized Gothic temporalities. Finally, using the framework of queer phenomenology, I have showed how the physical layouts of these clubs, particularly the Depot, have created deviant spaces for the expressions of adult Gothic identities which are constructed as transgressive for attending events. The Depot's floor plan, full of comfortable seating and with the bar separated from the dance floor, is particularly welcoming for adult Goths who sit and talk with longtime friends about music and life events rather than spend their nights dancing. Gothic spatial rules on the dance floor are also observed more strictly at the Depot, where the few Goths who dance instead of socialize have no physical contact with each other. Using Linda's description of dancing as an example of adult Gothic behavioral norms, I show how dancing for adults can create individualized experiences on the dance floor which correspond to their individual motivations for club attendance.

The purpose of examining adult identities inside the club and interaction with the built environment is to explore more than what Goths over 40 wear out to the club. It works towards understanding how subcultural ideologies can be publicly kept alive over time, and what physical locations keep these stories intact. The Depot is part of an archive of aging; a site which holds a shared history. In a time where historic clubs like Manhattan's CBGB, which held decades of rock history, are closed down and turned into retail shopping, a small dive bar in Baltimore thrives, supported by a handful of adults. This chapter also functions as an oral history of the Goth scene in Baltimore. Orienting lives towards the Depot over the past twenty five years makes it more than a club for pleasure oriented participation – it has become a “home.”

## Chapter 6: Conclusion: Alternative Imaginaries, Gothic Temporalities: A Gothic Subversion of Social Aging

This study examines the cultural construction of aging in America through a study of Elder Goths in Baltimore, Maryland. I began this project with a few basic questions about aging and subcultural membership. Why do adults participate in the Goth subculture? What does it mean to them as they have grown older? After examining these questions, I propose that subcultural participation can be viewed as an attempt for Elder Goths to reassert their own agency against being aged by culture. They subvert the decline narrative of social aging by shaping their lives around alternative imaginaries which I term Gothic temporalities; individualized systems of meaning which allow them to make sense of their worlds through their understandings of darkness. Just as Crystal's birthday celebration at the party in Alexandria, Virginia was a funeral, Goths can celebrate their aging processes through embracing the darkness of Goth culture. I come to these arguments through analyzing images of the Elder Goth in American popular culture, examining the construction of adult Gothic identities across the lifespan, and discussing how Elder Goths can create Gothic Spaces as subcultural archives and spaces for communal aging.

By examining Goths over the age of 40 through interdisciplinary lenses, I have expanded existing sociological literature on Elder Goths through approaching subcultural membership as part of a lifespan project, and viewing aging as a cultural construct. By immersing myself in a small community over a period of two years, I was able to examine identities outside of the club in depth, moving the study of subcultures away from sociological, semiotic approaches and towards the study of

everyday life. As the first research project focusing on American Elder Goths, I have provided a subcultural perspective on social aging in a mid-sized American city. Finally, I have suggested that Elder Goths can assert their power against the dominant narrative of aging as decline through creating Gothic temporalities.

The results of this project raises questions about existing research on middle aged Goths. First, this study partially questions Hodkinson's assertion that Goth remains a collectively aging subculture held together by a shared subcultural style. This may hold true in Britain, but the Gothic community in Baltimore is bonded together more by the creation and maintenance of lasting friendships through socialization and shared love for Gothic music than consistent stylistic distinctiveness. Instead, akin to punk, Goth has become more internalized rather than publicly performed – in Linda's words, “walking down the street and feeling like an alien because I like dark, creepy things that other people just don't like” - with reduced need to shock others or visibly display their subcultural status through clothing. My findings also partially question Hodkinson's suggestion that there is no shared social meaning to Goth. Goths can create a shared ideology through a combination of factors filtered through darkness – Gothic music, creating community through nightclub attendance, religious practices – which subverts the narrative of decline by transgressing the boundaries of life and death. When examining activities in Gothic nightclub spaces, this study confirms Hodkinson's view that attendance at nightclub events continues to be integral to the subculture for Elder Goths; but I also argue that shared meaning is created in these spaces. Goth becomes a mode of communication in nightclubs – Gothic Spaces – which have become spaces for

communal aging and an archive of shared subcultural history. Finally, Baltimore's "blue collar Goths" question Goodlad and Bibby's assertion that Goths are educated and literate with the propensity for upward mobility. The Goths in my study were born into middle class families but prioritized working from a young age and attending (or working at) nightclubs instead of completing their university educations. These "blue collar Goths" cobbled together Gothic outfits from thrift shops and ripped their own clothes, creating a localized aesthetic which has become more subdued over time.

The limitations of this study open avenues for future research. The small sample size and geographic scope of this project raises questions about intersections between race and subcultural membership. Baltimore became the research site because of the city's embrace of eccentricity and association with darkness. However, this culture of eccentrics is primarily white and located in historically white neighborhoods in a highly racially segregated city. Future research could explore intersections between subcultural deviance and adult Goths of color in Baltimore or beyond. Tony and Spacey, musicians of color who attend events at the Depot, expressed surprise that a Goth scene even exists in Baltimore. Is the transgression of Goth available for middle aged adults of color? Examining race and performances of Goth open up more questions for future research. Do performances of Gothic styles have the same functions for all Goths? Does traditional Gothic dress, particularly involving elements of clothing derived from the Gothic literary canon which are historically and visually classed as white, truly subvert the norm for adults of color, or do performances of these styles reiterate power structures?

While this research project has discussed the meaning system embodied in the lives and experiences of three Elder Goths, many of the themes and conclusions – notably the challenge to the problematic construction of age – to some degree can apply more generally across subcultures. While it is beyond the scope of this project to address those subcultures, the supposition is that ageism is a source of discontent in American culture. Ultimately, this study shows how adults have agency in the face of being aged by culture. Rather than being societal outcasts, self-identified “weirdos,” “freaks,” and “oddballs” possess tools to combat ageist assumptions that we decline into cultural worthlessness. Social aging is not inevitable.

# Appendix



## set list

Date: 4/2/16	
9:00 - 9:45	Neska
9:45 - 10:30	Nicolaï
10:30 - 11:15	Angel
11:15 - 11:25	Dancer 50/50
11:25 - 12:15	Neska
12:15 - 1:00	Nicolaï
1:00 - 1:45	Angel
LAST CALL! →	

DJ Notes	Artist	Title
Neska	CLAN OF XYMOX	STRANGER
	DA TENGARD	ALMOST WASTED
	IN NATION	TRICENTRE
	KATO & THE GUNNYMAN	NAVIGATOR (THE DANCING MAN)
	<del>DAVID DAVIN</del> DANCE	CASHION
Nicolaï	WOLFESTEIN	FINO YOU'RE HERE
	Steel	Pearls to Swine (Diamond Skin)
	Wach docton	Hexen
	Alon Zelenka	Coax (Remix)
	TRSO	Shoom
	Mammi Manson	Down in the Part
	Minsky	Effigy (not an)
	Black Audio	Shit Kittens
	Hushaway	Pain Decay
	Terrordance	Lie, because it all hides
	<del>Control Motion</del>	<del>Control Motion</del>
	Breath & Decay	Control Motion
	Aeshebe Perfection	Forever
	Kanye Kommando	Love Your Neighbor
	Comphurst	Bullet Tick
Angel	XOTEX	Mechanische Uhrzeit
	X-RX	UNMITTELBAR ERGEBNIS

R = Request V = Video

A scan of the handwritten setlist for Elektroschock held on April 2, 2016. Posted on the Elektroschock Facebook group on April 4, 2016.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/elektroschock/>



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